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A THRILLING PUBLICATION



featuring **JOURNEY TO MISENUM** a novel by Sam Merwin Jr.  
and **THE WAGES OF SYNERGY** by Theodore Sturgeon



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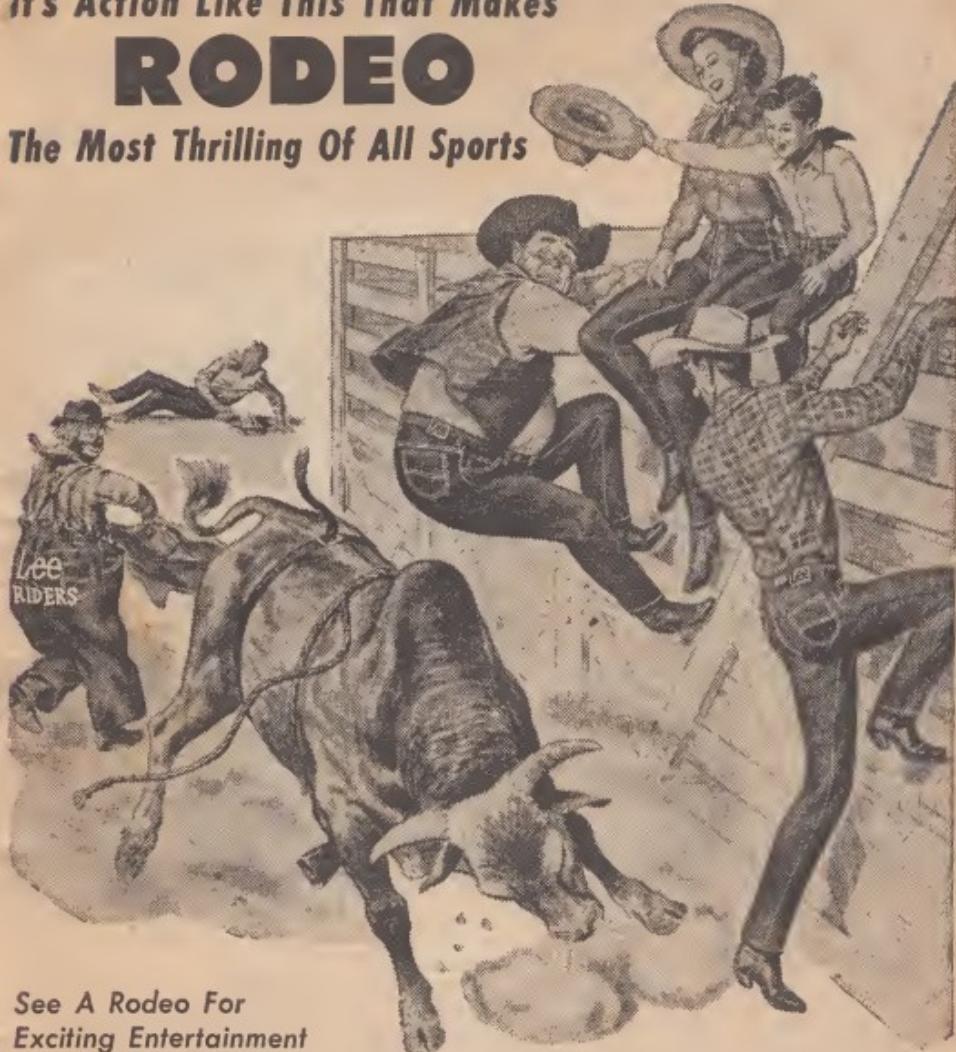


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# STARTLING

*stories*

Vol. 30, No. 3

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

August, 1953

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## WHERE ARE THOSE SPACE-SHIPS?

An Editorial by Murray Leinster

I THINK it time for us science-fiction fans to take thought and assert ourselves more strongly than we have done to date. I wouldn't say we have a mission to perform for the sake of humanity, of course. But we do have a function in the scheme of things. This is an age in which science is more important than it has ever been before. We are peculiarly—one might say very peculiarly!—interested in science. Yet we are not scientists. So what?

So a number of things. Let's start by admitting that there are some admirable characters who are both scientists and science-fiction fans at the same time. We will leave them out of all criticism and denunciations hereafter. May their tribe increase! But between most of us and professional scientists there is a wide and deep gulf. Consider. A run-of-the-mill professional scientist tends to think in abstractions, while we fans think in very concrete terms indeed. A nuclear physicist may think of atomic fission, but a fan will think of atomic bombs. At his worst, a pure-science scientist may go so far as to think of his science primarily as something to be known. But a science-fiction fan thinks of it as a source of ways to get things done, and of its effect on the lives of people.

The distinction is marked. You can notice the difference in thinking processes, especially when you read some of the scientists who are now beginning, very gingerly, to touch upon subjects we have been examining for years. Space-ships, for example. When a fan thinks about a space-ship, he thinks of it as something to be ridden in, lived in, handled like an automo-

bile or yacht, a thing which can be part of the lives of people. When some scientists think of space-ships, they think in terms of mass-ratios and exhaust-velocities and so on.

Granted that this is necessary at the moment, it is nevertheless an intermediate end. One wants to know these technical matters in order to do something with them. They are one of the ways by which one's end—a usable space-ship—may be reached. But there are some sorts of knowledge-loving minds which will gather that information and, then say vaguely, "Now, this is most interesting, but what was it, after all, that I intended to do with it?" No fan would be in doubt for a moment.

The trouble with some scientific minds is that they try so painstakingly to work out the possible that they forget all about the necessary. It's the space-ship that's the necessity. Exhaust-velocities and mass-ratios are only parts of one of the ways to achieve what is really needed.

There was an enterprise once which most people have forgotten. Once there was no way to get news from Europe to America except by ship. Then a man named Cyrus Field—a most unscientific person (he could have been a science-fiction fan) talked about a submarine cable. It was scientifically impossible to service a cable some thousands of miles long, sunk some thousands of feet deep in the ocean. It was preposterous! But a land-line could—by means of scientific repeaters—carry a telegraph message any distance on land, and it could be serviced, too, and kept in repair. There

(Continued on page 131)



KNOWLEDGE  
THAT HAS  
ENDURED WITH THE  
PYRAMIDS

## A SECRET METHOD FOR THE MASTERY OF LIFE

**W**HENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids and the mighty Temples of the Pharaohs? Civilization began in the Nile Valley centuries ago. Where did its first builders acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Beginning with naught they overcame nature's forces and gave the world its first sciences and arts. Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea, or were they touched with Infinite inspiration? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others?

Today it is known that they discovered and learned to interpret certain *Secret Methods* for the development of their inner power of mind. They learned to command the inner forces within their own beings, and to master life. This secret art of living has been preserved and handed down throughout the ages. Today it is extended to those who dare to use its profound principles to meet and solve the problems of life in these complex times.

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*Mighty Mite of Electronics*

# VIDEO-TECHNICS

by PAT JONES



ELECTRONICS has come up with a gimmick which may well provide the brain for atomic energy's muscle in the era of the second Industrial Revolution. We greet with a rousing cheer the news that the transistor, mighty mite of electronics, has come out of its swaddling clothes and is now slated for volume production.

The transistor, like the vacuum tube it may superannuate, has the power to amplify, oscillate and rectify an electric signal. Unlike the vacuum tube, however, it is a solid-state device.

Simply explained, this up-and-coming contender in the battle of watts is a diode, or two-wire device, to which a third wire is attached. It utilizes about two cents worth of germanium, a metal between gold and platinum in cost. The peculiar properties of the germanium crystal (which can be "grown" in the laboratory) permit electrons to bustle freely about their appointed rounds without ever leaving the solid state.

Encased in a plastic shell about the size of a bicuspid, the transistor has several distinct advantages over the traditional vacuum tube. More compact, it has longer life, lower power consumption and higher resistance to heat. Resin-imbedded units have withstood impact acceleration of 1,900 times gravity, and centrifugal acceleration of 31,000 times gravity.

The first transistors cost as much as a portable radio. Improvements in production techniques have brought costs down to a more reasonable level. Two types, the point-contact and the junction transistor, are now being produced. At this time, the junction transistor will be used principally as oscillator and amplifier at lower frequencies,

the point-contact for very-high-frequency circuits.

While the transistor still has some disadvantages, it shows considerable precocity for such a youngster on the electronic scene. In 1937 Robert Shockley, a recent graduate of MIT, began his experiments with solid-state amplification at Bell Labs. His work, leading to the development of the transistor, spurred similar projects elsewhere, notably those at RCA.

At a much-publicized exposition, RCA demonstrated experimental models of some fascinating gadgets, notably a portable t-v receiver weighing only 27 pounds and having a four-inch screen. Transistors also made possible an experimental eight-note piano the size of a waffle, and a wireless phonograph the size of a package of cigarettes. Hip pocket entertainment may well be just around the corner, although it is not a simple matter of replacing the vacuum tube with a transistor. An entirely new circuit must be designed to accommodate it.

For the present, the Army and Air Force have priority on transistor products. Electronic equipment in fighter planes is sometimes one quarter the weight of similar transistorless models.

Declassified developments include computers of increased speed and accuracy as well as more efficient communications systems. This points to the transistor's future incorporation in more advanced and integrated mechanical brains.

Next step: lighter, more reliable equipment for rockets and spaceships where every ounce and inch will count. Watch our word!



*Elspeth's was a mission to ancient  
Rome—and when in Rome do  
as the Romans do, be it kiss or kill*

I

**E**LSPETH MARRINER reclined on a low couch of ivory and ebony and tried to forget that, if she stayed in this strangely backward world, she would have to wait at least fifteen hundred years for a cup of tea. The jug of Marsala which Gnaius Lagonius had forwarded by his body slave, Cratus, was raw against the chords of

# JOURNEY



# to MISENUM

A Novel by SAM MERWIN, JR.

her throat—especially when compared regretfully to the fine Falerno locked in the wine room of the villa's basement.

Yet she was bound to drink it in common courtesy to Gnaius Laconius, who leaned gracefully against one of the exquisite neo-Corinthian pillars of the portico, reciting an ode he had composed in her honor. His tan toga, edged lavishly with maroon embroidery, matched in hues the pale tan and dark red of his face and hair.

With a gesture that suggested passion while not disarranging any of the chain of ringlets which framed his upper face, he declaimed in fluid Latin, ". . . whose very breath, soft as the summer's night, sparks passion in my body with the speed of light. . . ."

There it was, she thought—another of the odd anachronisms that cropped up occasionally in the work and words of Gnaius Laconius. She considered somberly the puzzle he had become to her, while half-listening to the rolling hexameters he was uttering.

Mentally she reviewed his lapses. There was the evening at Berenice Agrippina's palace when, in the course of a conversation on medicine, he had mentioned a surgeon's scalpel—a device this world had yet to see or possess the steel to make. There was the afternoon in the forum when, languidly pretending an interest in things military with young Decimus Juvenalis, recently appointed to his army tribuneship. Gnaius had used the phrase, "swift and deadly as a war-rocket." Decimus Juvenalis had looked puzzled, then let it pass.

And now, "speed of light." She eyed the poet narrowly, seeking other alien traces. But Gnaius, with his flat curls, his effeminate gestures, his carefully affected lisp, his redolence of Asiatic perfume, his demi-drunkenness, seemed the typical aristocratic poetry-buff of Vespasian's reign as Emperor of Rome.

Yet his appearance was a mask. Intuitively she must have known it from the first. There was an exotic quality to his verse itself, despite its careful couching within the poetic limits of the

era, which suggested a rigid restraint, hinted at knowledge of other forms and phrases and concepts beyond those of this world.

Truly, Elspeth's mission to an Earth, retarded by cosmic disaster and delay some nineteen hundred years behind its myriad sister planets, was turning an odd corner into an even stranger street. For Gnaius had not once given her an indication that he was an agent of the Watchers, those tireless guardians of the delicate balance between parallel time-tracks—though she had given him ample opportunity. Watching him, listening to him, she felt all at once afraid.

Her assignment was cultural rather than diplomatic, economic or military. Discovery of this backward world, known among the agents as *Antique*, offered a priceless opportunity for study of the ancient world at first hand—of its customs, language, poetry and daily existence without the filtering of subsequent opinion.

A POET of considerable progress before she became enmeshed in the work of the Watchers, endowed with a fine classical education, Elspeth had been an obvious choice for the job. She had entered into it with zest and relish, eager to walk among living parallels of the giants whose thoughts and works had remained fresh for two millenia.

She had felt a pang that discovery of *Antique* had not come earlier—when Vergil, Horace and the delightfully wicked Ovid, coming hard on the heels of Varro, Catullus and Lucretius, had brought the age of Augustan poetry to its magnificent fulfillment. But the arid era of the Claudian emperors was ended, the age of Martial and Juvenal about to burst into satiric flame.

She had met young Decimus Juvenalis, a young man of twenty-four whose gloom of countenance but rarely lighted with the warmth of inner delight, and found him more engrossed in the military advancement of his career than in the poetry which had, on so many hundreds of

parallel worlds, already won him lasting fame.

Under Watcher sponsorship she had talked with Martial, currently voyaging on the Lower Nile, before his departure, had been given the opportunity of reading manuscripts in the finest libraries of the eternal city, had even found opportunity to mingle in the social life of Rome. It had seemed the most glamorous of milk runs.

She discovered that Gnaius, Laconius had stopped reading and was peering forward slightly, regarding her with

low. Its portico looked across the succession of flat rooftops to the incredible grandeur of the palaces that rose like fairy castles from the Palatine.

Dark green and white—evergreen and marble—although Elspeth had been resident in the villa now for more than two months, she found the vista still difficult to credit. Rome, under Vespasian, was rebuilt from the holocaust that had attended Nero's wretched reign, was soon to attain the ultimate glories of Hadrian. Truly, she thought savoring without pleasure the aftertaste of the Marsala,

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## *Sequel to a Sleeper*

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SAM MERWIN'S HOUSE OF MANY WORLDS, first published in the September, 1951, issue of STARTLING STORIES, proved to be something of a sleeper. Without ballyhoo it became one of the more popular novels of the year, was done in hard covers by Doubleday and then reprinted in a paper-covered edition. Such a situation obviously screamed for a sequel, a fact which has been pointed out to us at least once a week by enterprising readers.

So at last, here is JOURNEY TO MISENUM, a sequel to HOUSE OF MANY WORLDS. You'll find it a smooth-paced, engrossing job and an answer to those of you who have been wondering what Merwin has been doing lately.

—THE EDITOR

---

an intensity of yearning that caused her to lower her gaze, to sip her wine, then to look out over the portico balustrade at the panorama of the magnificent city.

The villa, like Lamia, her body slave had been generously assigned her by Pliny the Elder, who had been selected a resident agent for the Watchers in this anachronistic world. And if Lamia, from Elspeth's twentieth century point of view had definite drawbacks, the villa did not—save of course for such conveniences as inside plumbing and electricity.

Perched on the steep southwestern tip of the Cispian Hill, between the Vius Patricius and the Clivus Suburbanus, well inside the walls of the old city, it seemed to rise from the tops of the frieze of evergreens that nested in the slope be-

the modern versions of the city she had known were pallid carbons of Rome in full vitality and glory.

Gnaius, who had rewrapped the scroll of his manuscript, capped it with a peevish snapping sound, said petulantly, "I fear you have not been listening, Marina."

Emerging from her reverie with a start, Elspeth—Marina Elspetia for the present—felt her face go hot while she foundered for some polite way out of the predicament. She began, "The beauty of your tribute caused my mind to mount a dream." How corny, she thought, and wondered how to go on in the same vein.

THERE was no need to continue. Shedding his usual diffidence, Gnaius Laconius sent his manuscript scroll roll-

ing across the flagged tile of the floor. His arms pinioned her to the couch and his perfume, intermingled with the sourness of his breath, all but overwhelmed her as he brought his face close to hers.

He said, "I must possess you or I die."

She resisted an impulse to utter a slang saying of another later day with a "Drop dead then"—instead said, "Gnaius, what's come over you? You've never acted like this before." She decided with wry self-detachment that she was getting cornered and cornered.

"It is only because you have never given me an opportunity to express the feelings that send the blood coursing through my veins at every thought of you, fair goddess," he replied reproachfully.

An alarm bell in her head rang like a cash register. There was another one, she thought, adding it to her previous tally. What right had anyone in Vespasian's Rome to know about circulation of the blood. Her experiences in parallel worlds had inured her to all sorts of anachronisms—but this, she decided, was beyond acceptance.

She said, "I'm no goddess and I'm perfectly capable of being unfair," after allowing him to brush her cheek with his lips—which she suspected of having been stained red with betel juice or some such primitive cosmetic.

Elspeth was a little puzzled—for Gnaius had won himself quite a reputation by his indifference to the dark charmers of the city. It was rumored that his interests lay elsewhere. She sought in vain for a reason for this unexpected behavior.

Standing over her, he was almost a foot taller than the average Roman—actually taller than Elspeth herself. He might have been a Goth from the forests of Germany, but his features were cast in far less rugged mould.

When she rose he looked frightened at his own temerity—as if he expected her to scold him. She patted his cheek, looked into his soulful brown eyes, and said, "I shan't pretend I'm not flattered,

Gnaius, but I fear I must have time to consider your suit."

He looked like a condemned man granted a reprieve. He said eagerly, "Then I shall see you tonight at Berenice's?"

"Perhaps," she told him, though she had every intention of going. The son of the Emperor, and Berenice's lover, would almost certainly be present. Titus Flavius Sabinus Vespasianus had just returned from a journey through the northern provinces that had lasted almost four months and had carried him as far as Britain. After reporting to his father, he was due to make his first appearance in society. And Elspeth was frankly eager to meet and talk with a Roman Emperor-to-be.

Elspeth summoned her maid, Lamia, a sparkling little creature, while Gnaius smothered her with melting glances of love. His body-slave, a sawed-off Hercules from Mauritania name Narvo, brought his master's toga, an ornate affair, and draped it properly around him.

"Until tonight, fair goddess," said the poet with a bow. He tossed the end of his toga over his shoulder with an elaborate bravura and strode from the portico toward the inner rooms of the villa, the atrium and the street entrance. His sandal bottoms made faint scuffling sounds on the tile floor as he moved.

LAMIA eyed her mistress speculatively. Neither her inferior stature—the top of her blue-black head came barely to Elspeth's breasts in level—or her inferior station seemed to have infected the slave-girl from Pamphylia with the slightest notion of respect. She said, "You'd do better with the slave than the master, mistress." She proceeded to qualify this statement with some, to Elspeth, appallingly frank information.

"I'll keep it in mind, Lamia," she murmured when the garrulous little slave at last stopped speaking. She paused, her brows lifted curiously, as she sensed an air of excitement which the Pamphylian seemed to be having difficulty in repressing. "What is it?" she

asked bluntly.

"Madam," said Lamia, her eyes rounder than usual, "there's a messenger awaiting your audience in the smaller atrium. I put him there to be out of the way of your company."

"You should have told me first," said Elspeth, faintly reproving. Then, "What is it about him that interests you so, Lamia?"

Lamia wriggled like a burlesque dancer from another world and said breathlessly, "He is tall and fair and looks like a barbarian—but he comes from Aventine district beyond the Palatine and his accent is strange."

"Show him out here—at once," said Elspeth.

"Yes, Madam," the girl said patiently. She withdrew, returned a moment later to usher in a tall bronzed fair-haired man who looked about as much at home in tunic and toga as a longshoreman in a white tie and tails. As he came out on the portico the newcomer tripped over a dragging corner of his outer garment and uttered a distinct and thoroughly twentieth century, "Damn!"—at which Lamia giggled and slithered sinuously back into the house.

He stood rigidly in front of her and spoke in low-voiced English with a distinct Irish brogue, saying, "Miss Marriner, with the compliments of Commander Mestres."

Elspeth felt both fright and relief at the sound of her native tongue. She murmured, "Thanks" and took the envelope he offered her, scanned it quickly. It had been hurriedly written and said:

Dear Miss Marriner—Sergeant Carhart, the bearer, will back up my request for your presence as soon as possible. As you will understand soon enough, I am unable to visit you at present, to make known the present urgent situation of which Mr. Horelle wishes me to apprise you. Since it is important we co-operate I must therefore ask you to come to me, returning with Sergeant Carhart if possible.

Sincerely,

R. G. de Mestres  
(Commander)

Elspeth read it twice, feeling a chill at

the prospect of unknown and rapidly approaching action. Out of life-long habit she sought to read the character of Commander de Mestres from the written word. By his name, she decided, he must be French. Probably some sort of career military man, his prose rigidified by decades of service paper work. A man with a soul of starch, she thought, as she moved to a brazier and held the note over the flame till it was burned to ash.

"You walked?" she asked Sergeant Carhart in English, still speaking softly lest sound of the alien tongue rouse the curiosity of Lamia or one of the house-slaves.

**A**T HIS nod Elspeth tapped her lower lip with a forefinger, said, "Wait here while I summon my chair." Then, at his expression of contempt, "It's part of the act, Sergeant. Women like the one I'm supposed to be simply don't walk in Rome. And if you'd kept your eyes open coming here, you'd know why."

Again he nodded. Then, blurtingly, "Madam, I never seen anything like it. What sort of a place is this, anyway? If I'd known when I volunteered . . ." His voice trailed off.

Elspeth laughed, said, "I'll be with you directly. We'll have to move fast because my time is limited. Wait for me in the atrium—the room where you were before." And, as his face stiffened, "I'll keep Lamia busy so you needn't be afraid."

"Yes, ma'm," was the reply. Then, as they moved to enter the house proper, "That maid of yours—what was she after, anyway?"

"Probably just what you're thinking," said Elspeth. She went serenely on, deriving a childish amusement from shocking the sergeant.

A quarter of an hour later Elspeth was being carried in her litter down the steeply sloped Clivus Suburbanus, with its close-packed rows of apartment houses toward the Forum. Sergeant Carhart, bewildered but determined not to show it, strode resolutely alongside.

As they progressed somewhat erratically through the densely populated street—scarcely more than a broad alley by twentieth century standards, but paved with well-worn blocks of reddish sandstone, she saw through the litter curtains a plump dark girl in a bright orange stola brush against the sergeant. She let her stola fall open at the neck as the sergeant paused to let her pass, revealing the mark of her profession hanging from a chain about her well-fleshed neck, and murmured classic Latin phrases.

Sergeant Carhart yelped and pushed past her, his face turning brick red at the abusive jeers that followed him. He risked a sidelong glance at Elspeth, caught her watching eyes, turned from red to purple and muttered, "What kind of a place is this?"

She beckoned him close, whispered, "You're in a pagan world, Sergeant." Then, in a torrent of Latin, she directed her slaves to proceed more rapidly with the litter. She was showing off and she knew it but enjoyed it. Almost three months had passed since she had been able to converse with anyone in her native tongue.

They passed along the wider Avenue of Castor, with its brilliant mosaic pavement. Ahead, still out of sight thanks to the number and size of the buildings around them, lay the Tiber with its magnificent stone and marble bridges. On their right rose the round eminence of Capitoline Hill, topped with its ancient temple to Jupiter.

To their right the magnificent structures of the Forum merged into the seemingly endless palaces, temples and public buildings of the Palatine. While they lacked the airy slimness of Manhattan skyscrapers, there was a broad-scaled grandeur to their tiers of columns upon columns that was equally impressive. And, since from this viewpoint their marble and granite surfaces concealed entirely the ground of the hill on which they were built, they gave the effect of being one single tremendous and complex building.

Calling the sergeant to her side Elspeth said, "Quite a spectacle, isn't it, Sergeant? A lot more than the history books give us."

Grudgingly reluctant to be impressed he replied, "Yeah—but I don't see how they ever found time to build it. Not the way they seem to keep themselves busy around here."

"Sergeant!" said Elspeth in delighted reproof, and had the pleasure of seeing him turn the color of a salmon steak.

They skirted the Circus Maximus, passed a crumbling vine-grown gate of the ancient Murcian Wall, reaching a less densely built portion of the Aventine Hill and the ill-tended wall of one of the palaces of a Claudian favorite, long since sequestered and allowed to languish in disuse. At Sergeant Carhart's request, Elspeth alighted from her litter, told her servants to await her return, followed her usher to a ring-handled iron gate whose dark surface was bright with rust.

"Headquarters," he said simply, then rapped. A peephole was opened and a voice inquired in execrable Latin, "Who goes there?"

"Me, you motheaten son of a Sene-gambian baboon," was the sergeant's gentle reply.

"Pass friend," said the other in English. The eyehole closed with a groan of tired metal and a small door within the gate itself opened in creaking protest. Elspeth stepped through it and gasped. She was inured to the often sudden contrasts that resulted from interworld transfers but this one had been utterly unexpected.

The immense courtyard in which she stood belonged to the world called *Antique*—but everything within it was grimly reminiscent of less pleasant aspects of worlds which had not been retarded by cosmic accident. She was in the midst of men and machines belonging to a regimental combat team of nineteen hundred years later.

**T**O HER left, mechanics were working over a row of some two dozen tri-di caterpillar cannons of the latest

design. Armored pipits were lined up four deep to her right and smaller groups of other armored units were scattered about the four-acre area. All vehicles wore the airy massivity that proclaimed their ability to fly through the air or hover as well as to travel in water or on land. Their gun-snouts, swathed in plastic protectors, looked like ugly stunted poles.

The men who lounged about the area or worked on their machines were clad in slate grey coveralls and long-brimmed fatigue caps and the heavy, high-laced boots of the military of an era far removed from the brief tunics, greaves, breastplates and helmets of Roman soldiery. The language they spoke was English rather than Latin.

Their presence, in the abandoned palace of the Claudian favorite on the Aventine hill, stunned Elspeth, who moved through them toward the palace proper as if in a dream. Never before, in the missions among worlds she had performed for Mr. Horelle and the Watchers he represented, had there been occasion to transfer from one world to another any such sizable unit of force.

If force were needed; usually it was obtained through placing a weapon, taken from some other world, into the proper hands. Thus the Watchers maintained the cosmic balance between the myriad existences of Earth.

There were other causes for wonder at such action. Usually it was the policy of the Watchers to maintain secrecy at all costs. They usually operated through sparsely settled agents in residence and small teams of two or three travelers. Only a few, a very few persons on each version of Earth were held sufficiently educated, intelligent, imaginative and well-balanced to be permitted to make transfer between worlds. Yet here was a force of several hundred officers and men transferred in bulk to a world that, save for its having been retarded in development, seemed to be following the normal course of history. Elspeth could not help but wonder why.

They entered a gloomy, half-lit hall of

the sequestered palace, in which unshaded electric bulbs gleamed as occasional anachronisms. Elspeth let her thoughts range backward three months to the briefing Mr. Horelle had given her for the assignment on *Antique*.

She did not have to close her eyes to see the Chief Watcher's alabaster skin, his wise and gentle deep-set eyes, the alabaster texture and color of his paper-thin old hands, clearly veined with blue, as they rested upon the top of his magnificent study desk, flanked on one side by a terrestrial globe, on the other by a celestial one.

Only now, faced with this appalling anachronism, did she recall clearly the warning he had given her at the time. He had said, "Elspeth, I'm sending you out alone for the first time."

Her reply had been a prompt, "Good!" Ever since their first trip to other worlds, she and Mack Fraser, a tough materialistic and mechanically minded ex-photographer had worked together on jobs involving transfer between worlds.

Their relationship had been a stormy one—any other was impossible between their varied natures. Elspeth was sensitive to beauty of thought as well as vision, frequently moody, apt to drift off into reverie on the wings of her imagination, with a poet's instinctive love of the bizarre, the colorful, the exotic.

Mack was strictly a meat and potatoes character—an ex-prizefighter and engineer who thought always in black and white, whose frequent shrewdnesses and insights were the more annoying because they emerged inexplicably from such a drab exterior. At the time Mr. Horelle assigned her to *Antique*, Elspeth and Mack had been indulging in one of their most angry feuds—of which the most bothersome factor to Elspeth was that, in the heat of the conflict, she had utterly forgotten its cause.

"This way, madam—are you okay?" Sergeant Carhart took her arm solicitously as, in her consideration of the quarrel with her former partner, she went blundering past an open doorway.

"Sorry, Sergeant," she stammered, abashed as always by her own ineptitude. Turning, she remembered Mr. Horelle's warning before he had sent her on the flight across the Atlantic that brought her to the transfer point, on Sicily half-way between Mt. Etna and the treacherous Straits of Messina that led to *Antique*.

He had said quietly, "We have been slow in discovering this anachronistic version of Earth, Elspeth—because the odd passage of the cosmic cloud that, by partially shutting off the sun's rays in its particular plane not only kept *Antique* in deep freeze for close to two thousand years, but destroyed life utterly on the two-score planets closest to it. We did not expect life at all in this sector.

"Hence we are seeking to profit to the utmost by this marvellous discovery of an ancient world contemporaneous with our own. However—" here he paused, locked his slender fingers, fixed the poet with his deep-set eyes—"we are not entirely aware of all possible implications in such an unprecedented situation. They may not be entirely pleasant or profitable to the worlds as a whole. I want you to look for anachronisms, to seek out whatever seems to you wrong. I hope I am making myself at least partially clear."

"You are, sir," she had replied, in perfect rapport. "And Mack isn't going along on this job?"

Mr. Horelle had shaken his head, told her, with the trace of a smile, "No, Elspeth, while his engineering talents might find much of interest in this world, we know most of the secrets of the Roman builders. What we have lost is much of their culture, their everyday use of the language, the way they thought and felt and behaved."

These were the words that had registered most deeply with Elspeth at the time. The warning reminded her of Gnaius Laconius and his references to things of which he should not have known.

Perhaps Gnaius was part of the suddenly distorted picture, for some distortion must exist to account for the un-

precedented show of force. She watched a stocky, half-handsome man wearing fourragère and the crossed batons of a commander rise from behind the desk and extend his hand.

He said, "Miss Marriner, Mr. Horelle asked me to extend his compliments. I'm Commander de Mestres and I hope you've been briefed on the situation. From where I sit it looks impossible."

## II

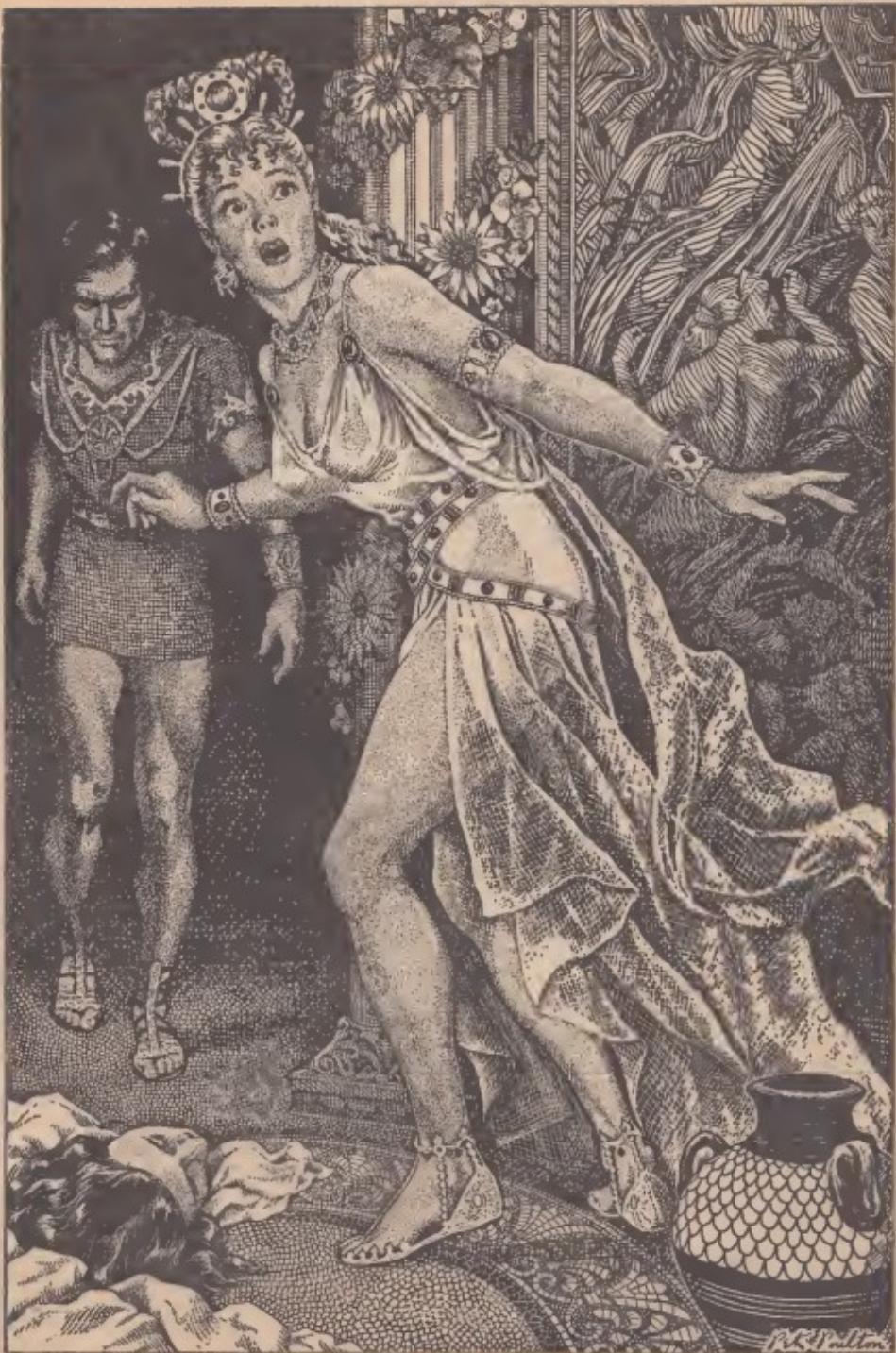
**L**OOKING at Commander de Mestres, Elspeth decided ruefully that her character analysis of the soldier through his handwritten note was a number of kilometers off-base. Certainly he was not French—his accents bore the homely twang of the North American Midwest. And while his face and bearing were stamped with the imprint of a lifetime of conformity to the discipline required of a career military man, the sensitivity of his mouth, the alert twinkle of humor in his eyes, above all a sort of rakish unstarchiness of apparel—these bespoke a man capable of detachment, if not of revolt, from the restrictions of his chosen profession.

"I'm afraid my briefing must have preceded this situation to which you refer," said Elspeth. "I have received no messages since I came here—which was three months ago."

De Mestres hunched his shoulders briefly, causing his orange and silver fourragère to drum three times in silence against the short ribs beneath his shirt. He said, "A hell of a lot has happened since. If only you could have been tipped off—but you weren't, and that's that." He regarded her mournfully across the desk.

"Suppose you tell me about it, Commander," said Elspeth. "I might have picked up something helpful. But mine was ostensibly a cultural mission."

"As you know," he began, "the very existence of this anachronistic planet is unprecedented." Then, at her nod, "It represents the most completely untouched mine of raw materials at present



Elspeth moved uncertainly into her room. . . .

known to any of the worlds—and those that have achieved space-travel have yet to make it productive.

"However, *Antique* seems to have a corollary," de Mestres went on. "Call it an opposite number if it's easier."

"Commander de Mestres," said Elspeth half angrily, "I may be a poet by profession and I may have flunked Algebra Two in school—but I did pass plane geometry. And I do know what a corollary is."

He brushed back his greying hair, gave her a quick grin, saying, "I had a hell of a time with algebra myself, Miss Marriner. I'm sorry, but you get like this in the service—too many numbskulls on top. You don't have to worry about the men beneath you."

"A soldier's life—" Elspeth paraphrased, responding at once to de Mestres' amiability. He gestured idly, went on.

"The damned space-berg or whatever it was that all but wiped out life in this probability sector and which created *Antique* seems to have produced a counter-effect in a probability sector directly opposite. Here the normal blocking out of the sun's heat was weakened and a flock of Earths were burned to a crisp.

"However, one among them survived—and having had its last ice age practically eliminated it developed, as the storybook boys used to say, apace. In short, it is presently on its last legs. Most of its land surface has been radioactive for centuries as a result of this precocity. Its late discovery by the Watchers hasn't helped, either. The name of this Earth is Heartland, for only in an area roughly corresponding to Western Asia, Central Europe and the Mediterranean regions does life remain."

"A return to the womb," said Elspeth breathlessly.

DE MESTRES looked briefly puzzled, then nodded. "Correct," he told her. "With a few variations only the original fount of what we laughingly call Western Civilization is left. And by

way of carrying the analogy further, such civilization as remains seems to be a matriarchy. When the men had been pretty much killed off the women got fed up with the whole sorry business and took over."

"Sounds like an ideal world," said Elspeth quietly.

The Commander looked at her and his grin was quick and warming. He said, "Take my word for it, it isn't. Our people are doing what they can to bring Heartland back to self-sufficiency, but a couple of primary mistakes were made by the first agents to visit it. The matriarchs played it cute and a man was made resident agent."

"Sounds just like a bunch of males," said Elspeth mercilessly. "Taking it for granted the men were superior."

"Scourge me with whips if you wish," said de Mestres, "but I wasn't even there. It was just one time the percentages failed to pay off. If we'd sent a woman agent—but we didn't."

"And is this Heartland the reason for your military mission to *Antique*?" asked Elspeth, frowning at him.

"It is," was the prompt reply. De Mestres sighed and told her, "The master chart has revealed the operation of gateways on both Heartland and *Antique* that are not known to the Watchers."

Elspeth thought this over as de Mestres gave her time. The significance, as it sank home, became appalling. One virgin planet, one planet virtually stripped of raw materials—add the vagaries of a matriarchal civilization and open gateways on both planets unknown to the Watchers. She said, "You mean Heartland is raiding *Antique*?"

"Exactly," said de Mestres. "My men and I have been sent here to stop it—by force if necessary. We effected transfer at night via one of the new Z-type submarines and flew our machines in here last night. We're here—we want to get to work. Not more than a handful of my men have the slightest idea of what we're doing. They volunteered for a punitive expedition at triple pay. They were

selected more for ability to keep their mouths shut than for anything else."

"It must have been an incredible transfer," said Elspeth. In her mind's eye she could visualize the interior of the giant undersea vessel, stricken with the darkness of the void that attended all transfers between worlds. She saw its long, lean deck, a black streak on the night waters of the strait, lying awash as vehicle after vehicle emerged to rendezvous in the sky above her and head north toward Rome in the silence of muffled motors. Suddenly she came out of it to realize the Commander was talking to her.

"...must understand the considerable difficulties of our assignment," he was saying. "Until we get a clue to the missing gateways or actual illicit operations, my men are confined to the palace and its yard. They're human, unfortunately. They know they're in a city and they'll want to see it. Some of them will. I risked sending you Sergeant Carhart this afternoon simply because I could not leave here at the moment. I received a visit from the resident Watcher."

"Pliny the Elder?" said Elspeth, her mouth curving upward. "According to my schoolbooks he was a dreadful old bookworm who never spent a moment away from his work. Actually he's a charming old scoundrel with a flock of slave ghost writers from Greece."

THE Commander laughed. "I must confess I thought for a few minutes he must be an imposter," said de Mestres. "He proved quite convivial. By the way, Miss Marriner, can I offer you a drink of whisky?"

"You may and I accept—the next time we meet," replied the poetess promptly. "I'm so sick of Roman wine I'd literally give my shirt for some decent Scotch—but I'm going to a wingding tonight and I don't want to fall flat on my unpretty puss."

"I'll take a raincheck," said de Mestres, who seemed to be becoming less formal by the moment. "Unfortunately it's bourbon. In my world America is

not under British dominion as it is in yours."

"Do any of us really have home worlds?" Elspeth asked him. Then, without waiting for a reply, "I gather you want me to keep my shell-pink ears open and look for clues."

"If you don't," replied the Commander, "we're sunk. And if a world—Heartland—succeeds in betraying the Watchers and embarking on a successful career of polyworld conquest, the entire cosmic balance will be knocked into the proverbial cocked hat. You and Pliny are the only contacts we've got here—and remember, he's an admiral."

"Remember, Commander, the Navy brought you here," said Elspeth with a trace of mockery. And before de Mestres could reply to the gibe, "I may have a clue—it's so tenuous as yet that I'm not going to mention it. But I have stumbled on an odd human anachronism."

"Good," said the Commander, his eyes suddenly bright. "Now, Miss Marriner, what about *Antique*? You've been here longer than any traveling agent to date—what's it like?"

"So far," she replied slowly, marshalling her thoughts, "*Antique* seems pretty much to follow the main thread of basic probability. It has its peculiarities, of course. The Etruscans have remained stronger and trade with China is far more extensive than on most other planets in this era of history."

"But the main thread is there. They've had their civil wars—Marius and Sulla, then Caesar and Pompey, and Octavius and Antony against Brutus and Cassius, finally Octavius against Antony and Cleopatra. Augustus developed the Empire, Christ was born during his reign but doesn't amount to much yet, the Claudians performed all their excesses and Nero was assassinated ten years ago."

"The city is still uneasy, even under Vespasian and with Titus coming up. But it's building—Lord how it's building! If you haven't seen it, get Sergeant Carhart to tell you about it. He seemed

rather impressed while escorting me here. By the way, I'm due at a party Berenice Agrippina is tossing for Titus tonight. I'd try to take you, but I'm going to be otherwise busy."

Commander de Mestres glanced at the watch on his wrist, said, "I'll escort you to your villa myself. It might be wise for me to get acquainted with Rome."

"Thank you, Commander," said Elspeth, dimpling. "But you'd better bring along the sergeant and a few men. It isn't safe to walk alone in Rome after dark."

"In what way?" the Commander asked with a faint hint of smile.

"In any way," said Elspeth unequivocally. Then, as she had already told Sergeant Carhart, "This is a pagan city, Commander."

**A**T FIRST the journey was through the twilight shadows of the narrow Roman streets, then continued by torchlight at the rapid fall of night. Elspeth's escort was successively appalled and roused to sniggering comment by the early evening activity about the crumbling Murcian gate, struck spellbound by the torchlight magnificence of the Forum with its dizzying background of Palatine palaces and temples, silhouetted at the top against a yellow tea-rose afterglow, forced to engage in a brief struggle as footpads tried to raid Elspeth's litter at the first rise of the Clivus Suburbanus.

Leaving her at the entrance of her villa, Commander de Mestres pulled his toga tight about him against the cool evening wind, said, "It's been a pleasure, Miss Marriner."

"Marina Elspetia, please, Commander," she replied in Latin.

Flawlessly, in the same tongue, he said, "My apologies—I'm afraid my professional sang-froid is bubbling a bit." Then, in English, looking about him at the litter bearers and including the whole city in his gesture, "Lord, but they're small. I've always thought the Romans were a tall sort of master race."

"Average Roman man, five feet two," replied Elspeth. "Average woman five

feet. I'm something of a giant freak."

"A very charming one," said the Commander gallantly.

"Commander!" replied Elspeth, "Remember your wife and children."

"Not just now if you don't mind," he retorted, smiling. Then, serious once more, "I hope you uncover something soon. Old Pliny may be a wonder boy in this age but he wouldn't know a minor deviation from a major time flaw, I'm afraid."

"Don't be too sure of that," she replied. Then, with a salute to Sergeant Carhart, she slipped into the villa. For a moment she listened to the measured tramp of the soldiers' feet as they marched off down the steep slope of the Clivus Suburbanus.

She found Lamia peering out one of the narrow atrium windows at the receding backs of her escort. Reluctantly the girl turned at her mistress' summons, saying, "Madam, where did you ever find so many big men? And couldn't you have asked them in for a little?"

"You know there's no time if I'm to reach the party," Elspeth replied, eyeing her little slave.

"Is Madam well?" the slave-girl asked her.

The poetess smiled, told Lamia she was quite well and ready for her bath. In the chill of the Roman evening she was grateful for the hollow tiles through which a basement hot-air furnace dispensed heat evenly through floor, walls and ceiling—far more effectively than in the latter-day English style country houses which had been her own early environment.

She still found it somewhat uncomfortable to bathe under the sad black eyes of the Nubian eunuch who poured the water into her tub, to submit to Lamia's washing and drying, yet this was Roman custom and to reveal her embarrassment would have been to betray her status as an alien in time.

**S**INCE the occasion was an important one, she had had Lamia procure for her a gown of gauzy white linen fringed

with cloth of gold. There had been no time to try it on, and she was briefly dismayed to discover that, in the fashion then considered chic, it was scarcely concealing. Yet the steel hand-mirror informed her that it set off her figure enchantingly.

She tilted the mirror to look at her hair and sighed. Elspeth, like many ash-blondes, was in beauty-parlor parlance a dough-head—her hair so fine that it was virtually impossible to set. She complained of her problem to Lamia, who said, "I'd give up seven nights with a Gothic chief to have hair such as yours—so silken, so light in hue. I have been studying your problem. If Madam will sit down. . . ."

She went to work at once, using numerous combs and a lacquer that worked wonders at keeping her stubborn curls in place—though Elspeth did not dare inquire as to its makeup. Some of the Roman beauty aids were appallingly primitive in their composition.

Midway during the coiffure a house-slave brought word that the litter and escort sent to bring her to Berenice's palace had arrived. Lamia worked fast but carefully, refusing to let her mistress depart until she was satisfied with her work. Then, putting in place a final pin of ivory inlaid with gold, she said, "There! If Madam is not careful she will catch the eye of Prince Titus himself."

"And get my throat cut by some of Berenice's bullies," said Elspeth. She made a move to disarrange her hair, causing Lamia to squeal with dismay, then smiled and left it alone, added, "You've made me look like a lot more than I am."

"Oh, Madam!" said the slave reproachfully. "If you had but known some of the women I have served in this villa you'd not say it."

"All right, then," replied Elspeth, rising and letting the Pamphylian girl adjust her blue and silver evening stola, "I'll not say it. Be a bad girl while I'm gone."

"I'll try, Madam," said the girl, re-

vealing twin dimples in her full cheeks as she smiled.

Elspeth climbed into the heavy ceremonial litter that awaited her in the narrow street and wondered a little at her risqué remarks. Certainly Mack Fraser would disapprove heartily of this pagan world in which she was living so light-heartedly.

But Mack was full of disapprovals, though on occasion he could barely match a tomcat for morals himself. It was, she decided, the odd brother-and-sister relationship which had sprung up unwanted between them that underlay much of their quarreling. Though they were far from being lovers, neither could escape a sense of responsibility toward the other. She wondered briefly on what world Mack was working at the moment.

As the litter swayed over the uneven pavement she again considered herself and the anachronistic city about her. Certainly the Romans were shocking to one from a world nineteen centuries further developed. Their utter lack of conscience, their open immorality, their venality, their love of violence—all these were terrifying to a person reared in a neo-Christian morality.

Yet they lived with a gusto denied those in whom a sense of guilt had been implanted from birth. And the very openness of their wrong-doing had a certain element of charm. And certainly the resulting freedom of spirit and intellect made such poets as Horace and Sallust possible, such unchannelled scientific speculation as Pliny's acceptable in the most pedantic circles.

They were small in body and generally brief in life-span—but while they lived they lived. There was a robust devil-take-the-hindmost quality to their existence that struck a sympathetic chord somewhere in the Irish blood that partly filled her veins.

She considered what would happen if folk from a plundered planet were to strip them of their resources, ultimately of their gusto. It was not a pretty thought, for here, in *Antique*, lay a world whose potential seemed almost

limitless. No other Earth had been discovered by the Watchers so early in its development. Under the wise invisible guidance of Mr. Horelle and his successors and colleagues it might be possible to spare it the worst of the man-made cataclysms, such as Ghengis Khan, the Crusades, and, later, Charles the Twelfth and Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin, that had wrought so much destruction in so many other worlds, not only of human life and spirit but of the very elements themselves.

**A**S THE litter approached its destination Elspeth ceased her speculation at sight of the torch-bearing Praetorian Guards, tall for Romans and made taller by their high-crested helmets. They lined the walled street for a hundred yards in either direction, held back the mob of curious at either end. Elspeth's bearers were delayed a good twenty minutes by the press of other litters and chariots arriving.

It was the first party she had attended which was graced by a member of the Imperial family—though Berenice herself was attached in highly personal if unofficial manner to both the Claudian and Flavian houses. Knowing well the tragedy that almost certainly lay ahead of the proud yet appealing Judaeo-Roman princess, the poetess had been drawn to her as if by a magnet.

Perhaps sensing some answering exoticism in Elspeth that lay beyond her uncommon height and fairness the demi-Oriental princess had responded with a sudden warm friendship that had made the poetess' cultural mission both simpler and more complex than she might have wished—simpler because, through the Princess, Elspeth could obtain introduction to virtually anyone she wished in Rome—more complex because of the numerous social obligations it entailed.

Though Elspeth had been inside Berenice's palace on almost a dozen occasions, she was unprepared for its formal splendor when readied for a fete. Its usually cold-looking walls were hung with brilliant Oriental rugs of immense

size, its high-ceiled and frequently colonnaded rooms, usually dim after sun-down, ablaze with wall flambeaux. The atrium was awash with the colorful togas and tunics and gowns and stolas of the guests—and by the slaves, almost as magnificent, who attended them.

There was silence when the poetess entered and handed her stola to a tiny black girl naked above the waist, whose eyes were as wise and corrupt as the eyes of a dowager empress. Elspeth, feeling like a pale giant among the tiny dark women, could sense the hatred that stemmed from them. She smiled at two of them she had met, sat down and allowed another slave to check her coiffure.

Slowly conversation rose around her—conversation much like the talk that has passed among women in such chambers since humanity first emerged from caves. There was much laughter in which neither Elspeth nor the slaves joined.

Elspeth, sensing antagonism directed against her alien blondness and size, finished her toilette and let herself be escorted to pay her respects to her hostess.

A high-bridged, high-arched, nervously arrogant girl not as old as Elspeth, Berenice Herod-Agrippina was possessed of a fierce voluptuousness of feature softened only by the quick response of her well-cut but unexpectedly wide mouth. She looked truly regal in a gown of blazing silver, her arms, neck, fingers and raven-black hair ashimmer with rubies and sapphires.

When Elspeth curtsied before her, the Princess bade her rise and whispered with a brilliant smile which revealed one of the few complete adult sets of teeth in Rome, "Stay close to me, Marina Elspetia—the Prince will soon be here and I wish you to meet him."

"Am I then a Gothic Princess?" the poetess asked, recalling a story of the prince's romantic inclinations.

"I shall be close," said Berenice, but she had barely stepped from the platform when large male fingers gripped her upper left arm and she turned to find

Gnaius Laconius enveloping her own perfume in his own redolent aura.

In tunic of poppy red and gold edging and belt, his flat curls replaced by wood-shaving ringlets, his bare knees knobby and slightly bowed, he looked in Elspeth's opinion like something out of an early Hollywood movie. But she managed to suppress her desire to laugh in his face, to turn eyes she hoped were limpid on him.

He whispered fiercely, his rouged lips close to her ear, "My darling, we must slip away from this occasion together as soon as we can. I have been counting the moments since I left you."

"You!" she countered mockingly. She thought she had never seen anything more repulsive than the poet in his present get-up.

"What sort of talk is that?" he countered. "Marina, you must be mine tonight or I shall die. I'll blast myself if you refuse me."

The word "blast" did it. Only in the most advanced of the parallel worlds were blasters coming into use, blasters and the word blast. Added to the anachronisms she had already noted and Commander de Mestres' statement of the situation, it made Gnaius Laconius a worthy subject for investigation. Thinking, well, here I go for dear old Mr. Horelle and the many worlds, she said, "Later, Gnaius."

His face glowed beneath the paint that covered it. "You mean—there's hope?" he whispered, his voice trembling.

"I mean I'll go with you afterward. Not yet—Berenice wants me to meet the Crown Prince. Afterward . . ." A night with Gnaius was scarcely anything for a girl to wax romantic about. Besides, if Lamia were right about him—and she was seldom wrong in such matters—Elspeth had little to fear. . . .

### III

**T**HE Emperor-to-be was of no more than average height for a Roman. But as he strode toward his hostess through

twin lines of bowing and kneeling guests Elspeth received an impression of height. Perhaps it was caused by the fact the others present were lowering themselves, perhaps it came from the lifelong habit of command, perhaps it was inherent in the man himself. Despite his mere five-feet-two or three inches, the Crown Prince dominated the brilliant assembly.

Upon the platform, his greeting to Berenice was affectionate. He quickly lifted the deeply curtseying princess to her feet, smiled upon her with quick affection, then moved to the throne-chair which had been awaiting him at the platform's rear. Berenice, dark and graceful as a dancer—in truth, thought Elspeth, as the granddaughter of Salome should—to a stool at one side of the throne.

Almost at once the entertainment began. And Elspeth, who had never been fond of such cheesecloth and plump-lady exercises as folk dances, found the dancers incurably boring.

Mercifully, however, Gnaius seemed entranced. The poetess watched him covertly, unable to believe his enjoyment was real. Yet something in the endless ritual struck a responsive chord in his bosom and for the time, at least, he forgot to press his suit.

Relieved, she turned toward the platform, discovered that Berenice and her royal lover had slipped away, evidently through the heavy drapes behind the throne, thus leaving the other guests to amuse themselves as they wished without imperial restraint.

The little Nubian slave girl with the wise eyes slipped through the crowd and plucked at Elspeth's gown, whispered, "My princess wishes you to follow me."

Elspeth turned to make her excuses to Gnaius—but he was regarding the gyrations of a lithe and singularly effeminate saber dancer. She sighed at the evening in prospect for her, let the tiny slave girl lead her skillfully through the press of onlookers to a curtained door at the rear. It was guarded by a pair of Praetorians with pikes.

Inside, save for a scattering of other

slaves, Berenice and Titus were alone, reclining side by side upon a double couch, flanked by tables upon which stood flagons of rare wine, the inevitable roast suckling pig and baby lamb, and a centerpiece of roast peacock complete with plumage spread like a gigantic fan of blue and gold.

Her hostess beckoned to Elspeth and as she bowed again before the Crown Prince the poetess felt a sudden surge of envy for the princess, despite the tragedy that almost certainly lay in wait for her in the near future.

Her own life, despite the fascination of being a traveling agent of the Watchers, seemed bare and sterile by comparison.

Resting a hand on her royal lover's shoulder the princess said, "Carissima, this is my new friend, Marina Elspetia. She is a protégée of Pliny the Elder and puts our finest poets to shame. Surely she is fairer than any of the princesses of Gaul."

Titus regarded her with good humor and remarked with a smile, "I am happy to agree, Berenice, but you neglected to include the princesses of Britain. She resembles them more than any Gaul I have met."

**I**T WAS a pointed gibe for all its amiability—intended to point out to his mistress not only that she must not heed court gossip but that such gossip never included all possible facts. A shadow passed quickly over the face of the dusky granddaughter of Salome.

Noting it, the Crown Prince laughed and lifted her lips to his and kissed her. Then, to Elspeth and smiling, "My princess has spoken well of you, Marina Elspetia. Perhaps soon I shall have the pleasure of hearing your verses—and certainly Rome has need of a Sappho it can claim as its own. But for the present, I fear, I must reassure my princess that it is to her I have run, rather than fled from any rude lady of the northern forests."

Curtseying again, Elspeth backed out. She had a curious feeling of dissatisfaction with herself. Even though Berenice had carefully stacked against her any cards Titus might have been moved to deal her way, the poetess sensed the evident lack of interest she aroused in the Emperor's heir. True, Berenice had not had her brought in until she had eliminated all competition—and Titus was doubtless not eager to incite his mistress' wrath by showing interest in anyone who even faintly resembled a Gallic princess—yet Elspeth was convinced that his lack of interest was genuine and final.

Why, she wondered, did she repel such dynamic figures—and draw such oddities as Gnaius? Was she fated to go through life in such fashion? Her thoughts were not happy as she returned to the main reception room. Had it not been for her promise to Commander de Mestres, she would have slipped out and ridden home by herself.

Gnaius was awaiting her, both angry and frightened by her absence. "When are you going to see the Crown Prince again?" he asked her, the fierceness of his voice marred by its querulous uncertainty.

Repelled by his possessiveness Elspeth was coy. She said with lifted brows, "Really, Gnaius! Isn't that up to the Crown Prince? After all, we are both his subjects."

"Fantastic backward world!" exploded Gnaius. He took her by the arm and led her toward the anteroom beyond the banquet hall.

Elspeth had been on the verge of refusing to go with him but this further evidence of the poet's alienness tipped the scales in his favor. A small escort of Praetorians, from a pool on duty to attend to such services, marched them to Gnaius' white stucco villa on the Caelian Mountain, close to the old-wall gate.

It was Elspeth's first visit to her would-be lover's home. It was built around a poplar-lined patio and he led her to a sort of combination dining and living room, equipped with tables and couches and murals in brilliant color

depicting aspects of the gods and goddesses at play that had been carefully excluded from her textbooks on mythology.

Regarding these, Elspeth felt a pang of regret that her twentieth century upbringing prevented her from becoming truly acclimated in this world. It caused her to feel a sharp and disappointing sense of failure.

"Carissima, you have left me!" Gnaius stood in front of her, proffering a huge gilded flagon of wine. She smiled at him and took it from him and sipped its contents—more of the sharp Marsala she disliked—then handed it back for him to quaff.

"A true loving cup!" he exclaimed and drank deeply. Then, setting it down and leading her to a couch, "Where do you go when you withdraw so completely, Marina? Beyond your strange fair loveliness and intelligence, I believe it is your trick of turning in on yourself that so fascinates me. My mother...." His voice trailed off and, hesitantly, he laid his fingers on hers, then withdrew them as if they had touched dry ice.

She said, forcing herself not to show the wave of repugnance that coursed through her at his touch, "Tell me about yourself, Gnaius. After all, I know very little about you. Where is your home?"

"My home?" He laughed without mirth. "My home is the world, a world of my own imagination, a world far different from this primitive jungle of sword and statue, slavery and stupidity."

"Nice alliteration," she murmured,

wondering how he could be aware Rome was primitive if he came from *Antique*.

ANGER flickered over his weak features and his fingers tightened painfully on her arm. He said savagely, "You make fun of me, Marina! You should not. I cannot help it if I find women frightening—though yourself least of all."

"Thanks for those kind words," said Elspeth icily, striving to rise from the couch. But Gnaius, revealing unsuspected strength, held her with a grip of iron. His rouged lips came down on hers and the ardor of his embrace was not to be denied. There was nothing Elspeth could do to stop him, not without betraying Commander de Mestres and the Watchers. She had one annoying thought that, for once, Lamia had been wrong....

Afterward, watching him struggle to mask his disgust, she knew she had not misjudged him. While passion ruled him Gnaius had spoken strange syllables in a language she did not recognize—yet his reference to his mother....

Elspeth understood suddenly, and, with understanding, felt a certain amount of pity. Gnaius' eccentricities were all the result of his formative years, and he had all too evidently been ruled by his mother in an unhappy fashion."

His was, after all, scarcely an unusual psychological affliction, even in her own world, Elspeth thought. Then she remembered what de Mestres had told her

[Turn page]

## AMAZING THING! By Cooper

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**Ting**

that afternoon about the decadent survivors of Heartland's wars of extermination being a matriarchy. At the moment this was the final piece in the jigsaw puzzle that had been Gnaius Lagonius. At once she began to plan.

Elspeth fed him more wine and stroked his head, which she held against her bosom, until he began to snore regularly.

She waited five minutes, to make sure he was really asleep, and not once was the regularity of his breathing disturbed. Then, with care, she placed his head on the roll-end of the couch, slipped her left arm from beneath him and stood up.

What she was looking for she did not know. Evidently, since they had not been in evidence, Gnaius had dismissed his slaves for the occasion, or sent them downstairs to their cellar quarters. This in itself was almost sufficient to brand him as un-Roman. The need for privacy was virtually unknown among these people.

Gnaius grunted and stirred in his sleep, causing Elspeth to catch her breath and return her thoughts to the pragmatic issues at hand. Surely, if Gnaius were a transferee from Heartland, he would have brought with him some indication of the land of his origin, some device to be used only in dire emergency, some gadget to lead him back to the point of transfer that had brought him here.

He could scarcely have used the Straits of Messina gateway. If he had, the Watchers would have known it—they had apparatus that recorded inter-world transfers through all known portals. The fact that someone was using a gateway of which the Watchers had no knowledge restored Elspeth to awareness of the seriousness of the situation.

Where, she thought, would Gnaius have hidden any such device? Presumably in his bedroom, so that it would be handy in case an emergency arose while he slept. Thanks to her new-found knowledge of Roman interior housing, Elspeth had little trouble in finding the poet's chamber. It was on the other side of the house, with windows only on the

courtyard, thus offering maximum quiet and security.

She also saw why Gnaius had not taken her there but rather to his dining-living room. One whole wall was a sort of open closet, hung with stolas and gowns in all cuts and colors. At one end, in a tiny minority, were men's clothes, most of them familiar. Above and encircling the walls were more suggestive murals. Regarding the pictures briefly Elspeth brushed back a lock of blonde hair and murmured, "Never the twain shall meet."

Gnaius was ashamed of his eccentricities. Elspeth thought she would hate to be hated by anyone as much as his mother must be hated by him. Then she got down on her hands and knees and began her hunt for the unknown.

**IT TOOK** her a little while. In spite of her suspicions of Gnaius she persisted in thinking of his thinking as typically masculine and looked first in masculine hiding places—under the bed, in hidden wall recesses, in the bottoms of his sandals. She found nothing.

Then, realizing the probability of her error, she began methodically searching the gaudy stolas that hung along the wall. And by the time she had finished with the last of them she had found two items to justify her search. One was a map—the other was a weapon.

The map was no product of Roman civilization. It was a highly machined and scientifically accurate result of far, far more advanced civilization. It showed rivers and lakes and forest regions, unmarked by any vestige of roads or towns or other hints of civilization. It was printed on some sort of plastic which was thinner than India paper and tougher than vellum.

The weapon she judged to be some sort of blaster. It was of a dull black alloy and its body was dislike in shape, with a narrow, belled snout protruding from one of its edges. Apparently it fitted into the palm of the hand, was fired by squeezing the hand and emitted some sort of bolt or ray discharge

through the tiny barrel. It was, she surmised, only useful at close range.

Elspeth managed to stow the objects safely away in the blue-and-silver stola Gnaius had removed when they entered and placed over a side table in the living-dining room. Certainly her gown offered no slightest place for concealment. Finished, she returned to the couch on which her host slumbered and looked down at him.

She said, "Gnaius, it's growing late. I think I had better return home." Inwardly she cursed the lawlessness of the pagan city which made it impossible for her to pass through the streets alone.

He opened his eyes and stared up at her without recognition. Then he rose hastily and, falling to one knee, pressed the hem of her gown against his lips. "Forgive me—" he began.

"I do," she said, barely controlling the revulsion with which he inspired her. "I want to go home now."

He made no protest though he did have the courtesy to accompany her—this despite the fact that being abroad in the early morning hours evidently made him uneasy. They made the journey without incident of any kind and Elspeth left him outside, alone in the litter, surrounded by four sleepy slaves.

Within her own villa Lamia was curled up in a curved-bottom Greek chair in the foyer. Her mistress studied the voluptuous little Pamphylian, then moved silently close to her and kicked the edge of the chair.

The girl screeched and tumbled from the chair to the floor with considerable display of her short but shapely limbs, then scrambled to her feet with an air of sleepy but outraged dignity. "Madam," she said reproachfully, "surely I did not deserve such treatment."

"Surely you did!" said Elspeth resentfully. "You told me Gnaius Laconius was harmless as far as women are concerned. You were wrong."

Lamia clapped both hands to her mouth and her eyes went round with surprise. Then they closed and she began to shake and, for a moment the

poetess feared she was crying. And then she saw that her slave was convulsed with laughter.

"I want you to understand right now," Elspeth began angrily, "that I am not a woman who—" All at once, to her own mixed horror and relief, she found herself laughing with Lamia. Heavens, she thought, what is this world turning me into? But she kept on laughing till the tears rolled down her cheeks.

But there was little time to wallow in any sort of reaction to her experience, as it was imperative that Elspeth get her loot to Commander de Mestres at once. Not only might time be all important, but there was a distinct possibility that Gnaius might discover the theft and come after her with his slaves to recover the map and weapon she had stolen.

**W**HILE Elspeth changed into warmer and less conspicuous attire the slave-girl roused her litter bearers from slumber in their quarters. By the time the poetess was ready, her Iberians were waiting in the atrium with the litter. Beside them stood Lamia, wrapped in a dark blue stola of warm wool.

"Please—I feel I should accompany you, madam," begged the girl. "It isn't proper that you should go out attended only by these Spanish dogs—not at this time of night."

Elspeth cast a quick glance at her men-slaves, who were waiting sullenly by the litter-poles close to the door. Never before, she thought, had they looked so forbidding. Then she eyed Lamia, noted the alert resourcefulness of her expression and bearing. She supposed fondness for the girl was making an idiot of her.

Drawing the girl well away from the bearers she said in low tones, "Lamia, if I let you come with me I want your promise to keep your lips sealed, no matter how strange the sights you are about to see. And I want you to keep your mind only on service to me. Do you understand me?"

"I understand," said the girl with what appeared to be utter simplicity.

"Thank you, Madam, for letting me come. Left here in the house I should have worried for you."

"You may worry a lot more for coming," warned Elspeth. They went outside with the Iberians into the narrow street, whose shadows slithered like lurking assassins under the attack of the torches they bore. The women got into the litter together and Elspeth told the leader of her bearers, "To the Aventine palace we visited this afternoon. As rapidly as possible."

The slave bowed and they got under way. Once, while passing through the Forum, they heard the clash of iron on iron, followed by a sobbing scream as some man died in quick anguish. Elspeth shuddered and felt Lamia move quickly by her side but neither woman spoke.

Not until they had passed the Murcian Gate were they molested—and then the attack came furiously and without warning. All at once a bearer cried out and the litter thudded unevenly to the pavement. Swift footsteps sounded about them, followed by a hoarse cry and the sudden yelp of a man in pain.

Lamia, plucking a knife from beneath her stola, slipped out of the litter, leaving Elspeth alone. There was a horrid bubbling gurgle as another man died, followed by sounds of panting breath. Somewhere close Elspeth could hear the snap of a bone, followed by a hoarse scream of agony.

Suddenly, on the far side of the litter from that through which the slave-girl had moved into the fray, the curtains were thrust rudely apart, flooding the interior with erratic light from a torch that still flamed on the pavement outside. A man thrust his head through—a horrid filthy unshaven head with broken nose and one empty eyesocket and sweat-stained pock-marked cheeks. The brigand's one good eye gleamed at her with an unholy expression of pure lust.

Elspeth shrank back and opened her mouth to scream—but no sound issued. In the sheer horror of the moment she became possessed of a sort of hyper-

acutia, noted every scrape of sandal, every grunt, every exhaled breath in the struggle that still raged beyond the other curtain. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

But her thoughts were racing. While the one-eyed brigand revealed a hand whose filthy fingers gripped a rude stiletto already dripping crimson, she felt an instant of sheer panic. And then she recalled that she was not really a helpless Roman matron, beset by footpads in the ancient city, but a free-wheeling and supposedly resourceful agent of the Watchers, selected from among hundreds of millions as best able to persevere on her assignments among parallel worlds.

SHE felt a moment of regret that she had not brought with her the blaster she kept concealed in the strongbox in her chamber, then, as face and hand and knife drew inexorably closer, thought suddenly of the strange gun she had stolen from Gnaius Laconius—if it were a gun. Fumbling for it beneath her stola she thought, with odd detachment, that she was going to learn in a hurry just what it was.

The robber's hissed syllables made no impression on her consciousness. All her awareness was concentrated on the knife approaching her bosom—the lust in the brigand's one eye was evidently not for her person but for the jewels he supposed she was wearing—and in the odd disc-shaped weapon now fitted into the palm of her hand. She said a quick prayer lest there be some sort of safety attachment, pointed the nozzle toward that ghastly face and squeezed.

She felt the little disc leap in her palm but no flame emerged from the belled nozzle and for a moment she felt disappointment that Gnaius' weapon had proved a failure. Not fear, just disappointment. Too much was happening for her emotions to react with the logic expected of less abnormal situations.

Then she looked up at her attacker—and felt fear. The man's hideous face had vanished, to be replaced by a bub-

bling smoking stinking thing of burning flesh and bone that crackled as it seared. His bloody knife fell harmlessly on her stola as he tumbled backward beyond the curtains.

"Good God!" exclaimed Elspeth in English. The litter began to rock and, holding the alien weapon, she plunged through the curtains. One of her feet came down solidly on the body of what had been the one-eyed attacker and she leapt clear just as the litter toppled over on his gruesome remains.

There were no other attackers on the near side of the overturned litter, but Lamia and the surviving two of her Iberian slaves were penned in by a half-dozen ragged bandits, whose knives flashed in the torchlight as they closed in. At least as many bodies, lying like crumpled heaps of discarded clothing on the pavement, testified to the fact that her slaves were resolved to defend her with their lives if need be.

Elspeth slipped along the wall behind her as the footpads closed in for what was meant to be a final rush. She rounded the litter and pressed Gnaius' weapon against the side of the nearest bandit. He screamed as the blast burned him almost in two, then collapsed like an airless balloon.

Quickly the poetess eliminated the next bandit and the next, as a fourth fell before the short sword wielded by one of the surviving Iberians. The remaining pair of attackers, seeing the carnage about them and finding themselves unexpectedly outnumbered, fled crying into the night.

Returning the weapon to safe concealment within her stola, Elspeth surveyed the situation and said, "We shall walk the rest of the way. Come on—let's go. We're not yet out of the woods."

One of the surviving Iberians was wounded and Elspeth put a tourniquet about his upper arm to stop the bleeding of a torn wrist artery—an operation the slave endured stoically but which filled Lamia with admiration.

The Pamphylian girl, who had wiped her crimson blade on the ragged tunic

of one of the dead attackers, picked up a still-flaming torch and handed it to the sounder of the Iberians. As they proceeded past the gate toward the Aventine palace, she walked close to her mistress, regarding her intently from time to time with awe.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Elspeth finally asked.

"The way you stopped Janisius from bleeding to death!" she exclaimed. "The way in which you struck down the bandits with bolts of black lightning. Madam, you didn't tell me you were a witch!"

Elspeth smiled at the reproach in the slave-girl's tone. But she said, "Keep up with me, Lamia. You have a lot to learn."

"I didn't think so," said the girl with disbelief. "Not until just now." And Elspeth only then remembered that, in Roman folkways, a witch was no broomstick-riding hag but more or less synonymous with a goddess. The thought made her feel better for reasons she didn't wish to explain to herself.

#### IV

**T**HROUGHOUT the fight in the street Lamia had shown no trace of fear—but once they were inside the palace yard she shrank against Elspeth, muttering some invocation to the Pamphylian gods in her native tongue. The big war-machines, the size and uniforms of the sentries, the alien words Elspeth exchanged with the corporal of the guard combined to fill her with terror.

Not until Sergeant Carhart's large and sleepy countenance reflected the glow of a flashlight did she recover herself. Then she said, "Ah, the slave messenger, of this afternoon."

Apparently the sergeant's Latin was better than his speech implied. Interrupting himself in a series of low-voiced orders to take care of the damaged Iberians, he swung on Lamia angrily, tried vainly to express himself in Latin, then said to Elspeth, "Ma'am, tell this creature I'm no slave!"

Elspeth explained the situation briefly and the girl regarded the sergeant with new interest and respect. As they were conducted into the palace after the wounded had been arranged for, the poetess drew from her stola the map and the little hand blaster that had served her so well in the street fracas.

Lamia, with a little cry, offered a mate to it, said, "Here I have one too if you want it, madam."

Stunned, Elspeth stopped in her tracks, said, "Where'd you get it?"

"Oh, I plucked it from the robe of one of those barbarians who tried to slay you, Madam," was the girl's reply. "He'll never have use for it again. I thought it an odd trinket."

"You don't know how odd," replied Elspeth, freezing at the implications it presented. She had the girl wait outside while she went into the office where Commander de Mestres, sipping a cup of coffee with his collar unbuttoned, awaited her. There she gave him an account of what had happened, omitting only the details of her rendezvous with Gnaius Laconius.

"Evidently the attack was planned by him or by someone to whom he reported the theft," said the Commander. "What's your bet?"

"My guess is someone else did it," came the reply. "What I don't understand—" Elspeth shuddered, paused briefly—"is why, if the supposed bandits had such weapons, they didn't use them on us."

De Mestres regarded her thoughtfully, sipped his coffee, made a face as it scorched his tongue. "Probably," he suggested, "only the leaders of the group were so armed. You say their attack was going well until you caught them in flank with the blaster?" And, at Elspeth's nod, "It probably never occurred to him you'd have enough savvy to use the weapon properly." He eyed it distastefully where it lay with its mate on his desk, added, "Nasty looking little gun!"

"Do you think it's a Heartland weapon?" Elspeth asked.

De Mestres picked up the nearer one gingerly. "From what we know of their culture it fits," he said. Then, rising from behind his desk, "But we can soon find out for sure."

He crossed the room, unlocked an oblong metal box that stood on a table against the wall, lifted its case to reveal a transferometer. Seeing it Elspeth said, "Good!" and leaned forward to watch the proceedings. She was a little frightened at the reassurance she received from de Mestres' unshakable poise, from the homely twang of his Midwestern American accents. It made her realize how close to the margin of fear she had been living now for three months.

She was well acquainted with the marvelous instrument the Commander was operating. Each of the myriad Earths, existing in parallel space, had a slightly different atomic variation from all the others—a trade-mark that remained the same no matter how frequently an object or person from such a world was transferred to others.

The transferometer, whose face resembled the front of an old-fashioned radio in the multiplicity of its dials and indicators, was built not only to check the world-source of such an object but to locate any alien object to which it was tuned on the planet where it was operated. At the moment its use was the simpler first of these.

**S**UDDENLY de Mestres swore and Elspeth asked what was wrong. Turning to face her the Commander said, "Apparently Heartland is so newly discovered that its atomic gauge is not listed. We'll simply have to content ourselves with whether this weapon is alien or not to *Antique*."

It very definitely was. And since the A-gauge was not that of an object from any of the listed worlds, both Elspeth and the Commander thought it safe to assume they had captured two Heartland weapons. They returned to the desk, where de Mestres unfolded the map Elspeth had filched from Gnaius Laconius.

"Any idea where it is?" Elspeth asked him.

De Mestres shook his head, told her, "No—sorry. But I've got a lad here who knows most of Europe by heart—and from what we know about this problem it's Europe odds-on. The Mediterranean Basin is much too settled not to show some roads or towns. My guess is that it's somewhere in Western Germany. There's a hell of a lot of forest."

A few minutes later a slim dark young captain, wearing his combat jacket over striped pajamas, entered rubbing his eyes. He regarded Elspeth with sleepy appreciation and helped himself to coffee from the Commander's silex. Elspeth, who hated coffee, again wondered when, if ever, she would get a cup of tea.

At work on the map, the newcomer, whose name was Johnson and who spoke with a definite Southern drawl, quickly proved his commander to be wrong. After rubbing a bristly chin he said, squinting at the map, "That looks like Silesia to me. I'll check."

"It couldn't be the Rhineland?" de Mestres asked plaintively.

"Nope. Sorry, Commander, but that smaller stream looks familiar." At his request an ordnance map of Silesia was brought in and Captain Johnson located the area shown on the stolen map. "This cross marked on it," he told them, "is about six miles above the junction of the Meisse and Oder Rivers in Silesia. It's not far southeast of Breslau, closer to a little place called Brieg."

He paused, fingered the material of which the stolen map was made, said, "I wish we put ours on something as good."

"Thanks, Johnson," said de Mestres. "That does it."

Reluctantly the captain withdrew, casting sheep's eyes at Elspeth, whose ego derived an almost juvenile lift therefrom. When he had gone de Mestres said, "I think we should check that marked area. How do you feel about it?"

"Perhaps we should inform the resident agent," she said.

"I don't think there's time," was de

Mestres' reply. "After what happened on your way here they're bound to get the proverbial wind up sooner or later. I'll send him a message, of course—but I have a hunch we ought to investigate right away."

"Why not check on the transferometer just to make sure," said Elspeth. "I'm afraid you're right about Pliny. He's with the fleet at Misenum." She watched while de Mestres put the instrument to its use as a locator, retaining the A-gauge previously revealed by the hand weapons.

"This is it, all right," he said a minute or two later, revealing the coincidence of indicators. Both direction and distance check—north northeast and about a thousand kilometers." He glanced at his watch, uttered a curse, said, "It's close to dawn. I wouldn't dare send out a flier this near daylight. It would be spotted for sure. We'll have to wait till evening."

"That should be soon enough," she said, "unless they have radio or fliers themselves."

"We don't know what they have," was the reply as de Mestres paced the floor, frowning. "What's more, I don't know who to send. I daren't go and I'm the only person sufficiently briefed at present."

"What about me?" Elspeth asked promptly. "I can fly a pipit."

The Commander stopped short, peered at her as if seeing her for the first time. "It's those damned clothes," he told her. "I keep thinking of you as a Roman matron." He hesitated, then, "I hate to think of asking you to risk your life, but if you really feel you can handle it—after all, this is an emergency."

"I've handled some tough ones," Elspeth said simply. "And in view of what's happened I'll probably be safer on the move than hanging around Rome, waiting for another attempted murder."

"You'd better stay right here," said the Commander, pressing a buzzer. "I'll see you and your woman get quarters. By the way, I hope she won't let the men frighten her."

**E**LSPETH burst out laughing—she couldn't help it. The idea of Lamia being afraid of any man! The worst of it was she couldn't very well explain it to the Commander without giving him all sorts of ideas about her. He looked bewildered, slightly aggrieved, but accepted her apology and said, "I might send Johnson along if it's all right with you. He's the best navigator-flier I've got."

"Glad to have him along," replied Elspeth. Then, "By the way, Commander, am I under your orders or what?"

He regarded her somberly, told her, "According to Mr. Horelle we're in different command echelons. We're supposed to work together."

"It's a pleasure, Commander," she told him. Unexpectedly he offered his hand and she took it. She hoped he never found out about Gnaius Laconius. She felt no sense of guilt at being a thief, it was the other that troubled her conscience.

A pair of army cots were set up in one of the smaller and less eroded rooms of the crumbling palace and Lamia exclaimed at the miraculous softness of them, finally decided to sleep on the floor lest they give her a backache. Lamia regarded her mistress with somber speculation and said, "Madam, those men are soldiers—but soldiers of a sort my world has never dreamed of. They could destroy or capture Rome in a day with their weapons." She shivered. "Madam, it may not be my place to ask—but why are they here?"

"To save your world from far more vicious invaders," Elspeth told the girl. "Remember, you are vowed to secrecy. And your master is a party to the plan. He'll have you flayed alive if you reveal a word of what you've seen except to him or me."

Lamia snorted. Apparently, Elspeth decided, the elder Pliny was not too stern a master. Yet the poetess sensed that the Pamphylian girl could be trusted. Beneath the undiscipline of her morals lay a solid base of integrity that had revealed itself in a hundred different

ways over the past eight weeks. It was Elspeth decided, time she got a few hours' sleep while she could. A long night loomed ahead.

Commander de Mestres did not rouse the women until close to noon. Then he sent Sergeant Carhart to rap on their door. Lamia peered around it at him and Elspeth, awakening, heard the sergeant say, "Hello, honey, here's some duds I rustled up for you and the lady. I hope they ain't too big."

"What did you say?" Lamia inquired in Latin and the sergeant began to stammer awkwardly in the alien tongue. Elspeth told the slave-girl to accept the clothing, then assured the sergeant in English that it was all right and they would both be down shortly.

The clothing both fascinated and repelled Lamia. Measuring against herself a pair of battle dress trousers that reached from bosom to toe of her tiny body, she cried, "Barbarian clothing! But see how well-made it is—feel how light!"

**W**ITHOUT thinking, Elspeth plucked a cigarette from the package Sergeant Carhart had thoughtfully stuck in a breast pocket, and lit it.

"Madam!" cried the girl. "You're on fire!"

"Just smoking," said Elspeth, inhaling with joy. It was her first cigarette in three months. Evidently Commander de Mestres was not a smoker and she herself had been too agitated and too accustomed to doing without to ask him for one during their earlier sessions. Regarding the girl she said, "Better get dressed."

"I'd prefer to keep my own clothes on," Lamia replied thoughtfully. "Madam, you are big and blonde and the grey-blue goes with your eyes. Me, I should look like a pig trussed for roasting."

"Suit yourself," said Elspeth, seeking a non-existent mirror to check her own appearance. She had a feeling of being at home in the uniform, even though military dress was new to her. At least

the things came from her own time, if not from her own world. She reminded herself to ask Commander de Mestres, the next time she saw him, just which of the worlds he was from.

"Madam," said Lamia plaintively, "I don't pretend to understand any of this, but it is evident that you are a witch of great power."

"I'm no witch," said Elspeth, dropping ashes on the floor and pushing a stubborn lock of hair back from her forehead. "I'm just—well, let's say I'm from a very different place. Outside of that I'm merely a woman like yourself—perhaps not quite as much so."

"Don't say so," countered the slave-girl. Then, "And this strange tongue you speak—what language is it?"

"Believe it or not we call it English," replied Elspeth.

"Then you must come from Briton," said Lamia, happy at having found an explanation that satisfied her. "Perhaps from the mysterious provinces of the north. They say there are many fair women there."

"We thank you," said Elspeth. "Let's just say again I come from a very long way off. Now, let's see if we can eat."

To Lamia's evident disappointment they were not permitted to share their mess with the soldiers but ate in the Commander's office, served by Sergeant Carhart.

Lamia, of course, was astounded by the alien food though she managed not to make too much fuss about it.

The meal finished, Elspeth asked permission to visit her wounded littermen, whom she found stunned but comfortable in a jury-rigged dispensary at the other end of the palace. They greeted her appearance with something close to terror and Lamia, more conventionally clad by their lights, had to reassure them all was well.

"They think they have died and been conveyed to heaven," the slave-girl told Elspeth outside the dispensary. "They think the illumination is bits of sunlight stolen to give them warmth."

"What do you think?" Elspeth asked

the Pamphylian girl.

Lamia shrugged her shoulders and said, "I've stopped trying to think. I'm merely trying to learn and see. And I'm glad you are here to protect me against things I do not know or understand."

"I'm leaving you tonight for a bit," Elspeth told her. "And while I'm gone—don't be an idiot, you'll be all right—I'm leaving you in charge of those two poor littermen. And I want you to behave yourself—do you understand? I shall probably be busy from now on."

**S**HE spent most of the remainder of the afternoon closeted with Captain Johnson and the Commander, completing plans for the trip to Silesia. It was agreed that they should take off in a light combat car as soon as darkness had fallen, be back before dawn or wait over until the next night if there were any question of flying over Italy by day. No check-up or relief would be sent them unless they failed to return within thirty-six hours.

"Fair enough," said Elspeth, a cigarette in her mouth. "Now, how about route? That's in your province, Captain."

"Call me Bill," said the flier-navigator with his boyish, disarming grin. Elspeth shot a quick glance at Lamia, who sat curled on a bench, silent and uncomprehending.

That evening, after dining on steak and french fried potatoes, she and Captain Bill Johnson took off in a helipit whose thin coat of light grey armor and caterpillar treads proclaimed it to be a light combat car. Before they rose from the ground the Commander said to Elspeth, "Try to get back here by morning. I can't keep my men cooped up here much longer. They want action."

"They may get it," said the poet. She clambered into the cockpit and sat down beside the captain, waved through the window at Lamia, who looked on in the focussed beam of the searchlight, apparently expecting the worst.

Bill pressed the starter button and Elspeth could feel the faint vibration as

the wings above them began to whirl. Once they had risen clear of the city the pilot would switch in the jets and the rotor vanes would fold neatly into the cabin roof above them. All in all, Elspeth decided, it was a very neat vehicle, improved upon its opposite numbers in her own world. But then, for the moment, her world was not threatened with large-scale warfare.

They lifted easily and, looking down, the poetess saw Lamia standing there, stricken by her mistress' airborne departure, a hand pressed against her mouth. Even as the beamed light was turned off, killing the view, Elspeth saw Sergeant Carhart's bulky form loom up behind the girl and place a reassuring arm on her shoulder. She smiled to herself in the darkness—Lamia was going to be all right.

According to plan they flew due east, thus passing only over the southern outskirts of the city. But even from this angle and made small by the altitude, Rome was impressive. The Forum was lit like a volcano, its facades reflecting in pink or white or lemon yellow, the bright lights of the huge torches that shed their smoky glow upon it.

But soon the Eternal City was a mere spot of light in the distance behind them as Bill Johnson guided the helipit's passage over the lower Apennines before swinging due north, across the Adriatic, Illyricum and Pannonia to their destination, in the supposedly uncharted northern forests of this still primitive world.

**A**T SEVEN thousand feet he cut in the jets and seemed, until Elspeth grew accustomed to the greater speed, to be taking leave of the world. The poetess looked up at the stars and wondered what it was like to travel in space.

Not that any person or group on any of the known planets had succeeded in reaching the stars. However, certain of the more advanced parallels *had* succeeded in reaching the planets though not as yet with spectacular results—economically at any rate.

A star, she thought; I am a star whose

beam extends its slender glow beyond galaxy's rim—a star chained to the rhythm of the universe, a universe which must be cold and whirling ash before my light is seen by men or other galaxies . . .

"What's on your mind, Elly?" Captain Johnson asked, bringing her abruptly out of her self-imposed spell.

"Oh," she replied, "I was just thinking what it must feel like to be a star—a little gay, a little sad."

"It'd be mighty hot," said Johnson. He had the dashboard light on since they were above danger of detection from below, eyed her curiously. "You sure you feel okay?" he asked.

Elspeth laughed, told him, "Don't mind me—I used to be a poet before I got tangled up in this business."

If anything this statement frightened him more than her previous one. He said, "A poet! But what in hell can a poet . . ." His voice trailed off in something approaching Donald Duck frustration.

"I know," she said with moderate sympathy. "It's frightening. But sometimes poets are able to view people with a certain amount of detachment—and oddly enough, no matter how many worlds the Watchers attain, all of them seem to be more or less full of people."

"I hadn't thought of it from that angle," mused the young captain. Then, evidently at last aware of his lack of tact, "When I saw you with the Commander last night I thought maybe he was off his rocker. I thought you were one of these dames from the city in that get-up. Then when I heard you talking American I felt better."

Elspeth decided to make him suffer, said, "It might interest you to know that I'm a British subject. In the world I come from the United States belongs to the British Commonwealth."

There was uneasy silence. Then, in a small if not still voice the Southerner drawled plaintively, "I reckon I've got a whole lot to get used to in this business. You see, this is the first time I've jumped worlds and it's all a mite strange."

"I understand," said Elspeth in more

kindly fashion. "Making transfer by submarine must have been quite an experience. That's one method I haven't had to use yet."

"Elly, it was downright frightenin'," said Bill Johnson. He went on to give her some of the details of that fantastic change of worlds, the while he piloted the plane expertly northward over the barren hills of the Northwest Balkans toward their destination.

Under full jets the helipit was capable of speeds up to six-hundred kilometers an hour—not fast for fighter planes in its own world but more than respectable for a combination vehicle. They had taken off at nine o'clock and their route was about twelve hundred kilometers each way. They had, according to Billy, encountered no appreciable air currents in any direction.

"If we were a sailin' ship we'd be sittin' in the middle of the pond," he informed her as the clock on the instrument panel registered six minutes of eleven.

"If we're on course we ought to be seein' something soon—if there's anything to see," said the poetess.

"We're on course!" there was outraged pride of profession in the captain's voice. He might not, Elspeth thought, appreciate poets and poetry but he certainly could handle a flier with more dash and finish than anyone she had ever flown with—even Mack Fraser.

"Look down there—at two o'clock," he said a moment later. And, as his questing eyes picked up the silver tape of a river winding far beneath in the moonlight, "That's the Oder. Just a little beyond the Meisse conflows with her. After that—well, we'll see."

**H**E BEGAN to bring the ship down in a gentle glide as it passed above the juncture of the rivers. Peering out at the ground below Elspeth thought she had never overlooked so desolate a panorama. As far as the eye could see in the semi-darkness of the moonlight, forest rolled unbroken like some mighty land-ocean. Nowhere did pinpricks of

orange or yellow break the stretch of darkness. It was utter blackout.

Elspeth felt certain depression seize her. The road had been too easy, too clearly marked. They were, she felt sure as she let her gaze follow a moon-bathed spur of rock that jutted up through the dark carpet below, doomed to a wild-goose chase. The Heartlanders, if it was those unfortunate people who were responsible for the invasion, had been too clever for them. If they found a thing beneath that forest sea, it would be a decoy, perhaps a booby-trap.

At the sound of a click she turned abruptly, said, "Why are you turning off the cockpit lights, Bill?" She had a fleeting suspicion of his motives.

But all the Southerner said was, "Look ahead."

Elspeth peered vainly through the plastic windshield—and then she saw it, a dim bluish glow that came not from the Moon's reflection but from some source still hidden by distance and the trees.

Perhaps it was not going to be a wild-goose chase after all.

## V

**C**APTAIN JOHNSON cut the jets and again the helipit vibrated gently to the silent swirling of the vanes. The bluish glare increased as they approached it at an altitude of about a kilometer. Conscious of a movement at her left, Elspeth saw her companion, his lips compressed, checking levers on the instrument panel.

He caught her glance, grinned quickly, said, "Just in case—maybe we could lay an egg on them—I've got a hundred-pound sodium bomb aboard. Maybe we can mop this whole business up right now."

"As you were," said Elspeth sharply. "You may be the pilot but I outrank you on this trip." She had no idea whether she did or not, but she sensed and feared Johnson's eager-beaver enthusiasm. "We came here to observe, not to destroy."

The Southerner actually pouted, and Elspeth had to explain. "Bill, we don't know enough to show our hand yet. This may be only one center of operations. Besides, dropping a sodium bomb on that layout would be like attacking a hornet's nest with a spitball."

They were well within sight of their target and it was evidently a large-scale mining operation, covering ten times the area one small bomb could affect. She surveyed it, frowning at its odd circular prefabricated domes, its evidence of round-the-clock activity, its number of men over machines.

This feature puzzled her until she considered the fact that these interplanetary pirates were new to transfer between worlds, undoubtedly had not yet had time to test the limits in size and tonnage of what could be sent from their own world into this one. Also, secondarily, that much of the machinery must be below ground. Such of it as did show impressed her untechnical eye as being compact and efficient, perhaps beyond that of any world she had seen.

"Okay, General," said Captain Johnson, "we've seen it and I've had the infra-red cameras on it. Want to go back now?"

"Sure you've photographed it all?" Elspeth asked and, at his nod, "I suppose we might as well. Commander de Mestres wants us back as soon as possible."

"It's your red wagon," drawled the Southerner, giving the wheel a twist. "What the hell!"

This as a bolt flashed past their wing, exploding above them in a rocket-like shower of varicolored blazing trails. Elspeth cried out as something burst through the cockpit behind them with a sizzling roar, leaving a smell of burning ozone behind it, cutting through the thin armor of their flying vehicle as if it were butter.

At once the plane began to buck like a mustang out of control while the Southerner, swearing softly but fervently, strove to reassert his mastery. Flames flickered in the fuselage at their backs

and the dark forest tilted and rose until it filled half the sky.

Elspeth had always supposed herself to be a physical coward. All her life she had fled from the threat of physical violence and pain—in her creed violence belonged only to nature while pain was a part of the ugliness that belonged to the foul family of death and sickness and the filth that bred them.

Yet now, for the second time within twenty-four hours, she found herself acting promptly and efficiently in the face of probable pain and possible death. Her hands flew without volition to the extinguisher that was clamped to the instrument panel. Bracing herself so that the violent gyrations of the helipit would not send her on her ear, she sprayed the spreading flames, which were licking angrily at paint and upholstery, with fire-killing foam.

**H**EAT seared her face and a sudden pseudopod of flickering yellow licked at the wrists of her coverall. She swore as efficiently as her companion and put out the last flaming assault with a last burst of extinguisher foam then sank into her seat exhausted. Her knees felt like eggs in a waterglass and little imps were snapping rubber bands at the backs of her eyeballs.

"I guess I'm as brave as anybody," she said aloud, "as long as I don't have time to think."

"Good gal!" said Captain Johnson, darting a hand from the controls to give her near knee a quick pat. Then, grimly, "But I reckon we aren't out of the woods yet—that's for sure."

"Or rather we're still in them," said Elspeth with a pitiful attempt at humor. The helipit was still rocking but less violently. They were well away from the blue-lit mining camp now and the tops of the trees seemed to be reaching up to embrace them.

"If I can clear this next hill," drawled the Southerner from between set teeth, "We should be able to ditch in the river."

"Here's hoping," said Elspeth, men-

tally crossing her fingers. To her annoyance her teeth were actually chattering.

Though Johnson was racing the motor for all it was worth, the helipit was still losing altitude—and he was far too low to cut to the jets. Worse, if he tried to while the vanes were still whirling, he'd strip them and inevitably crash them in the trees beneath.

Desperately he worked with the plugs on the instrument board, turning them, pressing buttons savagely. Then, as Elspeth braced herself for the inevitable crash, the lagging motor seemed briefly to catch hold again. The helipit lifted some fifty feet, barely making the rise. The hill fell away on the other side and the silvery Oder curled broadly before them.

"Mother always said I'd make the grade if I ate my oatmeal," muttered the flier. Elspeth felt such a surge of relief at the narrowness of their escape that she was unprepared for the shocking jolt of their striking the water in a sheet of spray that momentarily shut out the world.

It subsided and the poetess had one quick water glimpse through the windshield of the dark shore rushing toward them—then a shock that left her lying bruised and shaken on a tilted cockpit floor. They had missed one crack-up to fall into another.

Suddenly fear of fire returned to bring Elspeth out of her punch-drunk condition. If Billy had not cut the switch before they struck they might be incinerated. Pulling herself onto the seat she checked the instrument panel, felt sobbing relief as she saw that, with his last conscious gesture, the Southerner had cut off the engine.

For Captain Johnson was definitely out. He lay across the wheel like a collapsed drunkard, blood trickling from his right ear and from an ugly bruise on his forehead. For a minute or so Elspeth sat paralyzed, thinking him dead. Then, without warning, he began to snore. The poetess found herself giggling like an hysterical schoolgirl, for the moment unable to do more than sit there.

## Surprise, Surprise!

**S**COTCH-DRINKING friend of ours tried Lord Calvert at our home, out of sheer politeness. "Egad!" he exclaimed. "It really IS good!" We know he meant it, because he ordered a case from the local store next day. And he's not *that* polite.

If you're a scholar and a judge of whiskies, try some Lord Calvert soon. It costs a little more and tastes a little better, and we think you'll be pleasantly surprised. (Surprised, too, how little space a case of Lord Calvert takes up.)

Lord Calvert. Blended Whiskey. 86.8 Proof. 65% Grain Neutral Spirits. Calvert Dist. Corp., N.Y.C.

She found herself eying the unconscious pilot with a dislike she knew to be utterly unfair. After all, he had done a magnificent job. Yet, annoyingly, a voice within her kept repeating that Mack would never have got them into such an impasse, that he always managed to come up with a way out no matter how hopeless the situation seemed.

Yet Captain Johnson needed attention. Though she was aching and bruised from the smash and her wrists were blistered from the cockpit fire, she was going to have to do something for the Southerner. She considered getting him out of the helipit, but a look at the forbidding forest border in which the vehicle had wedged itself caused her to decide such a move was beyond her at present.

The rear of the cockpit, penetrated as it had been by the incendiary charge, was out of the question. So the poetess

managed to pull and tug at her companion until he lay on his back across the seat. He had stopped snoring but blood was still trickling from his ear. His forehead was beginning to purple.

**A**LL she could do, she decided, was to bind up his head. She did so, then threw over him a half-burned seat cover from the rear of the cockpit. She wished she had managed at some time or other to learn medicine, or at least to have got some nurse's training. She had no idea whether her pilot was dying or not.

She opened the cabin door and stepped out into icy water that rose to her knees. Its chill was unpleasant but helped to restore her senses fully.

The helipit itself was battered but still looked serviceable. Its blunt nose was driven almost a foot into a high bank of moss, loam and underbrush, but did not look hard to pull out. Elspeth's spirits rose as she toted up the damage. Then she scrambled up out of the water onto the bank and saw the vanes—and her morale plummeted.

Only three of them were intact. The fourth looked like a piece of taffy at the wrong end of a taffy-pull. It was grotesquely twisted and torn, hung forlornly from its mooring. No wonder, she thought, that the machine had behaved like a sailor three days in port.

As nearly as she could calculate, Billy Johnson had come down in a curve of the river that had caused him to run the helipit into the bank on the same side as the factory they had seen from above, whose anti-aircraft cannon had shot them down. She wondered if there would be a search, decided there probably would.

Overhanging trees hid the vehicle against air search fairly well—but if the miners had scanning or other search equipment to match their other machinery, it seemed unlikely to the poetess that they could long miss finding them.

She lit a cigarette and looked about her in the moonlight and thought, so this is the forest primeval! Then, as some

creature made a rustling in the trees beyond the bank, she checked her blaster, made sure it was in order and ready for use. There was no point in doing anything until morning, so she crawled back into the helipit and tried to doze in the charred rear of the cockpit. In the front seat the unconscious Southerner was snoring again.

Elspeth managed to get a few hours of broken sleep, but when at dawn the forest awoke to a chattering of birds and other animal sounds, she scrambled out of the damaged vehicle to the bank, determined to scout around before trying to restore Captain Johnson to consciousness.

Once beyond the barrier of thickets that lined the riverbank, the forest thinned out to become almost a grove. Elspeth found herself treading upon a soft carpet of pine-needles and her poetic soul responded to the natural Gothic cathedral created by nature around her.

Growth of new timber thickened as she went on, until she found herself walking along a sort of path, no more than four feet broad, banked on either side by baby firs, struggling for life amid the great strangler roots of the older taller trees that seemed to ignore the upstarts striving to rise amongst them.

Even here in the untouched forest, she thought, the dog-eat-dog struggle for survival went on, intermeshed as always in the very warp of existence. She turned a corner and barely suppressed a gasp as, in a little clearing, three savages, half-clad in animal skins, clustered busily about another.

Her hand darted to the blaster at her belt. Some inadvertent sound must have betrayed her, for the wild men turned like one, their mouths agape, their dark eyes staring. Elspeth had only time to note that their faces were shaven before, with queer unintelligible utterances, they took to their heels and fled toward the depths of the forest, leaving behind them the object that had drawn their attention.

At sight of it Elspeth gasped. Dangling upside down, his ankles caught in

the simplest sort of rope-trap depending from the branch of a tree, was Mack Fraser. He looked slightly the worse for wear, and his blood, rushing to his face, had given his complexion the hue of a cocktail cherry.

His choked, angry voice brought her out of her surprise. He said, "Dammit, Elly, get me the hell out of this, will you?"

So unexpected was the sight of her erstwhile-partner in such a scrape, that she could not suppress a giggle as she moved forward to blast the rope from which he hung, causing him to land with a thump on the pine needle floor beneath.

He said, "Shut up, you idiot—it's not funny!"

She said, "Dr. Livingston, I presume," and got a dirty look. Impulsively she offered him a cigarette.

**I**NHALING it with unspoken gratefulness, he got up, testing his limbs and finding them all there, told her, "You've got to get out of here in a hurry. The Heartlanders are scouring the woods for your ship. I figured you'd have come down around here and tried to get here ahead of the Martinez when those damned nature boys bushwhacked me."

"Come on—I chipped a few trees so I wouldn't get lost. My pilot ditched us in the river after the ack-ack got us."

"How badly are you damaged?" asked Mack, ever-pragmatic. He shook his head doubtfully when Elspeth told him as best she could. "If you can't get out of here it's going to be a hell of a mess. The Martinez and her gang are mining and transferring uranium by the ton and they aren't going to let you or me or anyone else stop them."

"What's the Martinez?" Elspeth asked him, feeling unaccountable security in the nearness of Mack and stealing a look at his tough rough-hewn, handsome-homely countenance.

"You'll be lucky if you don't see her," was the reply. "She's the boss of this operation—and just about runs Heart-

land as well. Ana Kai-Martinez—she's the toughest, smartest, best-looking Amazon in a world of Amazons. How those women treat their men!" He shook his head.

"You seem to be doing all right," said Elspeth. "If you weren't why should those phony cave-men have tried to do you in?"

"I'm in a hell of a spot," Mack said ruefully. "Men on Heartland are an inferior sex. They get no practical education, are given no hand in politics. The women run the show. But I'm supposed to be a phenomenon because, although I'm a man, I know a little engineering. So I've been getting privileged status on this deal and naturally the rest of the men hate my guts. They're being treated like beasts of burden. This hunt for your ship gave them a chance to get me."

"And you fell into a rabbit trap!" gaped Elspeth. "Gracious, Mack, do you suppose the condition of these Heartland men is contagious?"

"Shut up," snapped Mack. Then, softening, "I suppose I ought to thank you for getting me out of that mess. They were just figuring what they were going to do next. None of their ideas was—pleasant."

They reached the riverbank and Mack studied the ruined vanes of the helicopter, then went inside and looked at Captain Johnson, who was still unconscious and snoring again. He gave Elspeth a look of reluctant admiration, told her, "Looks like a good first aid job, Elly, even though I hate to admit it." Then, glancing into the rear of the cockpit, "Kind of a mess-up, isn't it? Doesn't look too bad though. How come you idiots flew right over the mine?"

"We had no instructions it might be defended," said Elspeth.

Mack frowned, said, "These Amazons aren't fooling. They've made a hash of their world and now they think they've got a chance to reclaim it. It's big stuff, Elly."

"How come they don't use sodium if they're so short on uranium?" Elspeth

asked him curiously.

"Believe it or not, they don't have enough radioactives left to trigger a pile of radium itself," said Mack. "Come on, let's take another look at that busted vane. Got any tools?"

She sat on the roof of the helipit, handing Mack the instruments he needed while he worked to put the vehicle in operable shape. After a while she asked him, "Mack, how does it look?"

"Can't tell yet," was the reply. "But if I can get rid of this damned vane and this whoosit can fly on three instead of four you may get her out of here by sundown." He paused, squinted down at her, added, "Gee but you look beautiful today, Elly."

Well aware that she was smoothed with grease and in a general condition of disarray, she said, "You're lovely too, you big creep."

He grinned briefly and blew her a kiss, then got back to work. Finally, as the shadows of late afternoon were beginning to cover the top of the vehicle and inch out across the water, he rubbed his hands on the sides of the overalls he was wearing, sat down beside her and said, through puffs on a cigarette, "Well, that's it, Elly. Back her out of the bank in full reverse, head her upstream and take off. Cut in the jets as soon as you can. Those damned vanes took a beating."

**G**REASE and all, Elly leaned over and kissed him. For a moment one of his strong arms tightened around her shoulders. Then he sat back and said, "The Martinez would have a fit if she caught this."

"Oh!" said Elspeth, drawing a little away from him and hating herself for being so vulnerable. Then, in a small voice, "What does this Ana woman look like?"

"Like a king-sized Diana with red hair," was the reply. "She's good, too—knows a hell of a lot about running this show. But she made a mistake when she gunned your ship. I knew it was a Watcher's plane and tried to tell her—

but she said it would teach them a lesson and cut in the automatic cannon." He paused, wiped his greasy face with the back of a hand, added, "How much of a show have we got in this damned world anyway?"

"A big one," replied Elspeth. "The biggest I've ever seen. We came up here to check the location of the gateway and to get a line on the extent of the operation if possible."

Mack grunted, then said, "Stationed in Rome, I suppose. It must be quite a job to keep things out of sight."

"It is," replied Elspeth. "But it's being done. Well, I've got to get Billy Johnson back in one piece if I can."

Mack looked at her oddly. He said, "Good looking guy—if you care for the type."

"Thank you Mack," said Elspeth sincerely. She gave him another quick kiss and, before scrambling down off the helipit, "Better get rid of that grease, honey. Your Martinez might wonder how you got into it out here in the forest primeval."

"Good idea," he said grudgingly, handing her the tools, which he had assembled before sliding down. "Thanks again for getting me out of that jam in the woods."

"Think nothing of it," she said airily. Then, more softly, "Mack—it's nice to know we're on the same job—even on opposite sides."

He gave her a half-grin, scratched his grimy nose, said, "Yeah—remember, full reverse, then upstream, then up. You ought to make it okay if nothing else happens."

"I know we will, Mack—good luck." He was still standing there half-merged with the shadows of the underbrush, as she pulled the cabin door shut after propping Captain Johnson in the other corner of the front seat and got the engine going.

There was a sucking jar as the vehicle asserted its power and came clear of the bank. She cut in the vanes once they were clear of the overhanging shrubbery, felt the unrhythmic vibration as they

caught hold of the air in three-quarter time. Looking down as the ground fell away beneath them, she could not see Mack at all.

She cut in the jets and headed due south, thinking over the eventful scouting trip on the way. Poor Mack! She could not help smiling to herself in the darkness as the helipit sped through the night, recalling him, hanging upside down in the super-rabbit trap the false barbarians from Heartland had rigged for him.

She wondered why she had seen no evidence of the real Goths and Germanic tribes who presumably roamed the Silesian forest. Probably, she decided, there were too few of them over too large an area for her to have stumbled on any natives save through merest chance.

Yet the fact the Heartland Amazons dressed their men as primitives while touring the woods suggested another idea. The natives might be in the vicinity—but could have been scared out of showing themselves by the weapons and threats of the planet looters. The skin costumes could have been adopted to prevent barbarian rumors of the invaders from seeping south to the borders of Dacia and Pannonia, thence to Rome and, perhaps, to the ears of the Watchers.

Elspeth reached the Adriatic coastline before she realized she was lost. Looking down she had not the slightest idea whether she was over Aquilaeia or Salona. However, she continued to head south, diagonally across the long narrow sea, resisting the temptation to veer west and fly down the boot of Italy to Rome. It would never do to risk being spotted from the ground.

The moon passed under gathering clouds at that moment, which helped her not at all. For the first time since being air-borne, Elspeth felt the clutch of fear beneath her breasts. Having come this far with the wounded man, the photographs and a report of her conversation with Mack, she had no desire to mess up the trip.

**B**E SIDE her Captain Johnson stirred and mumbled in his sleep. She hoped that he would not recover consciousness and be out of his head—however, she could use his navigational help. She was debating the wisdom of trying to wake him when a *blip-blip-blip* sounded from the instrument panel. Commander de Mestres was operating a radio beam for her benefit. She all but laughed in relief.

From then on it was easy. Less than an hour later she had cut the jets and was hovering uncertainly over the courtyard of the Aventine palace under the damaged vanes of the helicopter. During this peaceful last leg of the journey, she had had time to wonder about a number of puzzling factors.

Why, for instance, had not the Heartland invaders transferred to the Congo or the Urals or one of the other really great uranium deposits instead of mining the relatively low-grade ore of Silesia? Several answers occurred to her. One, in this world the Silesian ore might not be low-grade. Two, perhaps in decadent Heartland all record of the Congo deposits might have been lost. Three, no convenient transfer point might have been discovered.

Another possibility entered her head—that perhaps the Heartland pirates might be engaged in looting other uranium deposits on *Antique*, unknown to the Watchers. But this was unlikely—certainly transferometers must have scanned this and all adjacent worlds.

A searchlight beam illuminated the palace courtyard beneath her and she brought the limping helipit gently down, managing to mangle the landing so that it bounced twice before coming to a halt. She scrambled out in a hurry, feeling dead tired all at once.

As she was lifted down to the ground by the strong arms of Sergeant Carhart, Captain Johnson sat up and looked around, a puzzled expression on his bandaged face. He scowled at Elspeth and said, "For Pete's sake, get in. We're already late for the take-off."

Elspeth smiled and turned away, will-

ing to let someone else do the explaining. She felt her knees hugged, looked down into Lamia's upturned face. The slave-girl was crying and saying in Latin, "I was sure you were slain, Madam. I was sure you were slain."

She managed to reassure the girl, who was in a state of happy collapse, by the time she reached the Commander's office. There she made her report, as concisely as she could, omitting only the portion in which Mack had been strung up by the Heartland men.

He heard her out in grim silence, his lips tightening as she described the effect of the weapon used to bring down the pipit. When she had finished he looked at his folded hands, then at her, and said quietly, "You know what this means, of course, Miss Marriner—it means war for the first time between different versions of Earth. It also means things are coming to a boil."

"Yes, sir," said Elspeth meekly. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to return to your villa," replied de Mestres. "You must get in touch at once with the resident Watcher and inform him of what had happened. And I want you to keep an ear to the ground for anything untoward that goes on in the city."

"Why? What could happen?" Elspeth asked.

"I don't know," was the reply, "but I must remind you that my men and I are in a highly precarious situation here. Oh, we can defend ourselves, never fear—but whether we can do so without destroying our chances of accomplishing our mission is the problem. I shall call on you tomorrow, when I return from transfer. I fear a conference with Mr. Horelle is in order."

"Give him my love," said Elspeth, thinking of the kind, wise, old man of Spindrift Key, with the weight not of one but of hundreds of worlds on his slim, stooped shoulders.

## VI

**I**T SEEMED strange for Elspeth to

awaken the following morning in her bedroom on the second story of the Cispian villa. Moving in and out among staggered time-tracks was, she decided, a great deal more demanding than the transfer between worlds to which she had, after a fashion, become accustomed.

The effects of the Silesian crash were still with her—her body remained stiff and sore from neck to soles and her fair skin was marked with a number of purple bruises. She stirred and looked around and saw Lamia standing over her, a hand extended to shake her awake.

"Don't—I'm awake now," she murmured to the slave-girl, her tender body shrinking from any contact. The girl informed her that a messenger had arrived from Pliny, then at Ostia with the fleet, announcing that, in response to her night-sent summons, the resident Watcher was proceeding to the city and expected to dine with her at noon. Feeling the lack of a watch, Elspeth inquired as to the time, was informed she had scarcely two hours to prepare for her guest.

"Princess Berenice Agrippina also sent a messenger," Lamia informed her. "She wishes you to meet her at the Bath this afternoon."

"I'll be there," said the poetess, placing her feet on the floor and slowly standing erect. In keeping with the custom of the city, she wore no clothing while in bed. The slave-girl's dark eyes widened at sight of the bruises on her body.

"You have been hurt, Madam!" she exclaimed.

"You should have seen the other guy," replied Elspeth, smiling again at memory of Mack Fraser, dangling upside down in the trap.

Eyeing her askance, Lamia busied herself expertly with giving her mistress an oil massage that, within an hour, worked much of the soreness and stiffness from her limbs.

Later, while the poetess was relaxed languidly in her bath, Lamia eyed her sternly and said, "I don't understand what is happening. What are these

strange soldiers in the Aventine palace, and what was this wizard's machine that carried you to the clouds?"

Elspeth sat up in the tub and studied the girl before saying, "Lamia, I cannot explain now but witchcraft and wizardry have nothing to do with it. I have been sent here to help your world against enemies of which it is not as yet aware."

"I do not doubt you, madam," was the slave-girl's response, "I only wish I could be of more assistance."

There was no mistaking the sincerity of her wish. Elspeth hesitated, then said, "There is a chance—just a chance—that if all goes well I shall be able to take you with me when I leave. You would, of course, no longer be a slave, for there are no slaves in the land I come from. You would have much to learn, much hard work to do. Do you think you would like it?"

"Oh, madam!" cried the girl eagerly. "I will gladly be your slave forever."

"That's just what I don't want you to be," replied Elspeth. "I believe, in time, you might be a very valuable person. What's more, I like you and I want to see you get the chance. But this is not a promise. Many things might happen to prevent its fulfillment."

"I shall help you in any way I can," the girl said simply.

Bathed, Elspeth refused breakfast in consideration of her coming dinner with the resident Watcher. Lamia, she discovered, had already arranged the meal with the chef. Since both were possessions of the Admiral, she had no worry lest the meal not suit him.

IT WAS, for that era and for a man as important as Pliny the Elder, a most simple repast, fitting to a lifelong scholar and sailor. There was soup flavored with vegetables and the bird's nests of China, a baked carp in aspic, adorned cunningly with colored flowers by the chef, a saddle of baby mutton roasted in herbs and wine, and for dessert, fruit, biscuits and a small cheese from Malta. A flagon of the Admiral's finest Falernian accompanied the dinner.

Gaius Plinius Secundus, who had arrived shortly before noon with a small escort of horsemen, was small even for a Roman, a man of modest mien and nervous mannerisms, who seemed to resent each minute that moved, like a link in some immutable chain of time, into his past. Yet, despite his restlessness, he discussed during the meal his wife and son, still in his villa at Lake Como, the state of his vineyards, the excellence of the food, the recent indisposition of the Emperor, the strength of a new Scythian hemp in the fleet hawsers.

His speech was slow, precise, interlarded with pauses while he marshalled thoughts and moved words and phrases into line of battle to express them with the precision he invariably sought. Yet, underlying the almost terrifying gravity of his preoccupations lay the half-laid pavement of self-mockery that made the man, to Elspeth at any rate, far more a dear than a bore.

He paused while describing to her the problem of Roman ship-architects in designing a rigging that would be of help to the oarsman between decks while heading into a wind. And somehow she sensed that he was not hesitating merely to arrange his words in order but in the hope that she might give him some advice on the problem.

"Sir," she told him, "you know that I am not permitted except in emergencies or under special orders to give you information that belongs not in this era. However, have you considered the advantages of a sloop rigging on a large vessel—or of using more than one mast?"

Pliny pondered the statement, gravely, then with a spark of excitement. He held a dripping piece of mutton skewered on his knife and said, "But would not that make the vessel cant dangerously in a heavy wind, Marina Elspetia?"

Elspeth shrugged, then added, "I have said too much—but have you also considered eliminating oarsmen entirely? With skilled rigging and hull design you can do better in all weathers with sail alone."

The admiral-scientist dropped his

knife with a clatter, staring at her in disbelief. Then, his voice low, he muttered, "And what if such a vessel should be becalmed?"

Elspeth wrinkled her nose, told him, "I'm no sailor, but I believe in that case small boats with oarsmen can use towropes."

Her visitor-host remained silent while digesting her radical suggestions along with the rest of the meal. Then, after dismissing Lamia and adjourning to a secluded chamber where they could not be overheard, she told the resident Watcher something of the situation, ending with, "We have reason to believe that, now the Heartlanders know we are aware of what they are doing, that they will take more drastic action. What we don't know is where the move will come."

**P**LINY pondered her statement, then said thoughtfully, "Were I in their situation I should seek to take advantage of the Emperor's sickness and do my utmost to attain influence over Titus. It would be difficult for your people, my dear, to move if the Emperor's son and heir were against you. The Princess Berenice we can trust—but I like not the rumors of Titus' alliance with a northern princess."

"Princess Berenice has been quick to reassert her claim," said Elspeth, recalling the scene of her introduction to the Prince. "She has asked me to meet her at the Baths of Agrippa this afternoon."

"Then go to her," adjured the scientist-sailor, "and impress upon her to the best of your persuasive abilities the importance of ensuring the allegiance of Titus."

"I doubt that I shall have much persuading to do," replied the poetess. Then, because of something in Pliny's tone, "Have you any definite indications of what they plan in this direction?"

"Nothing definite," was the reply. "Yet there is a rumor among the officers of the fleet that Titus is far more attached to his barbarian princess than is generally supposed. Some of those who

saw her during the recent trip have described her as a blaze-haired giantess whose beauty is that of a goddess."

"I shall do my best," said Elspeth, as a sudden thought occurred to her. The mysterious Gallic princess, as described by Pliny, seemed to fit uncommonly well with Mack's description of the Amazonian leader of the Heartland invaders. She said, "What is her name?"

Pliny gestured his indifference, told her, "It is some barbarian nomenclature—Anna Martiana is the closest Latin equivalent."

"Why do you suspect her?" asked Elspeth, sure now that the Heartland leader and Titus' new flame were the same woman.

"I did not say I suspected her," replied the scientist precisely, after pausing to bury his face in the crimson juice of a pomegranate. "However, I mistrust anything out of the ordinary in the present circumstances. And this princess is reputed to come from the wilds of the east, where beauty such as hers is not known to exist."

"I'll find out what I can about her," said Elspeth.

"It might be wise." He slurped up more of the fruit, pointed his knife at her and added, "Would that I could know more of the strange machines and vehicles you and your people have brought into this world to help us defend ourselves. I feel like an orphan lad not invited to share in an imperial banquet."

"They would, I fear, be of little use to you, sir," said Elspeth. "I'm not impugning your intelligence or learning, but the techniques of centuries to come would look more like magic than science."

Pliny sighed and wiped his face on a towel. "I suppose you're right," he told her wistfully. Shortly afterward he took his leave and Elspeth, in company with Lamia, prepared to visit the Baths.

To Elspeth the Baths were the most impressive of all the impressive structures of *Antique*. It was rigid custom that, while men and women thronged together, as bare as when they came into

the world, no allusion to this general nakedness was ever made. Oddly enough, although Elspeth had found it difficult to keep her eyes from wandering during her first few visits to the Baths, she was becoming more and more adapted to the customs of Rome.

She took a quick plunge in the cold pool, then moved to the corner of the huge central pool, where Berenice as usual was holding court. The princess was reclining on special cushions brought by her attendants, her magnificent little figure on proud display. At Elspeth's approach she looked up curiously, her dark eyes narrowed, then said, "We have missed you since the fete. You look as if Gnaius Laconius had shown you more of the beast than we thought was in him. Tell us, what have you done with the poor creature?"

"I?" Elspeth was surprised. "Why nothing. It's true, I did leave your fete in his company but I have not seen him since."

The Princess' mocking eyes seemed to count in detail the bruises on the blonde girl's body. She said, "Then truly it is odd—that both of you should vanish at once, and he in such a passion for you. Now only one of you has returned."

**E**LSPETH was annoyed. She said, "Your mood is scarcely a pleasant one, Highness. Did you invite me here to abuse me then?"

At once contrition patterned the princess' face, which became a mask of tragedy. She said, "My apologies, Marina. I had hoped sight of you would cheer me. Surely you have heard the news."

Elspeth felt a stab of alarm. Something, she sensed, was going very wrong for the Princess. Under the circumstances it probably meant something was not going well for herself. She said, "I went to the country for a brief rest. I have heard neither news nor gossip."

"Then I might as well tell you—" said the Princess, who had dropped her royal "we,"—"my lover's barbarian princess arrived in Rome this morning. I am of a mood to pay him back in kind."

"Which would only lose him to you forever," Elspeth said promptly. Berenice's face crumpled and for a moment she looked about to burst into tears.

Then, rallying with a magnificent display of hatred, Berenice said, her voice low and fierce. "You're right, of course, Marina. I shall have to gain vengeance through *her*. She is expected to visit the Baths this afternoon. That is why I wanted my own friends at my side." She gestured about her and Elspeth realized with pity that, save for slave-attendants, the proud Princess was alone.

She said, thinking of Mack and his problematical relations with the red-headed Amazon, who had become such a sudden and threatening menace, "I have my own axe to grind in this contest, Berenice. And then when we have won the others will come trooping back."

"A neat phrase—axe to grind," said the Princess, seizing on the cliché. But Elspeth's thoughts were elsewhere. If the redoubtable redhead had journeyed so swiftly from Silesia, the Heartlanders must be equipped with vehicles to match those of Commander de Mestres. She felt a sudden dart of illogical relief that Mack at any rate must be separated from his outsized female protector.

And there was something else to consider in the arrival of Ana Kai-Martinez, or Anna Martiana, at the capital. The fact that she had felt impelled to leave the mining operation so vital to her planet and come to Rome to assert her influence meant that affairs were definitely coming to a head.

Elspeth, essentially a dreamer, felt the little knot of fear within her that always came at the prospect of violence. She wondered if the newcomer would be able to force Titus, virtually in power now with the Emperor ailing, to get his legionaries to storm the Aventine palace. The prospect was surely a fearful one.

What would Commander de Mestres be able to do? She wondered. He had expressed no fear as to his detachment's ability to defend itself against any odds—but under the assault of tens of thousands of Roman troops they might be

overwhelmed, notwithstanding the immense superiority of their weapons.

They could take off, of course—but that would mean defeat of the Watcher's purpose, would give the Heartlanders a start on what might be an unparalleled course of conquest among the hundreds of worlds. Elspeth shivered, wondering illogically what had happened to Gnaius, what his role in the whole proceeding could be.

She said to the Princess, "Highness, you have really had no word as to Gnaius Laconius' whereabouts?"

The Princess, whose attention was focussed on the entrance diagonally across the central pool, shook her head and said, "There is some fear he was slain two nights ago in a footpad scuffle close by the Murcian wall. I scoffed at the rumor, feeling that he was with you. If he was not, perhaps he is dead. A pity—for he showed promise as a composer of small satires."

Elspeth wished to ask more questions, but dared not. She had seen no sign of Gnaius in the mêlée on her way to the Aventine palace either among the survivors or the corpses. Yet such a rumor could hardly have been started had he not been seen by someone near the battle. A sense of alarm and guilt swept through her.

If anything had happened to the poet it must have come as a result of her theft of the map and weapon from his bedroom. She felt an unexpected shaft of sympathy for the sadly confused young man who had forced his attentions upon her—or was forced quite correct? She pondered the problem. Certainly, in view of her own assignment, Elspeth had encouraged his suit once she became aware of the odd anachronisms in his speech. Such thinking made her feel only the more guilty.

She was thus wrapped in wretched thought when a stirring of excitement about her, a sudden tenseness on the part of the Princess, caused her to forget self in awareness of her immediate surroundings. Something, very apparently, was happening.

A GROUP of attendants, wearing Imperial Household insignia, had entered and were clustered just within the main entrance, soon divided into two groups, one on either side of the portal. The entire population of the huge structure buzzed and grew attentive at the spectacle, looking, the poetess thought, like a collection of hairless pink seals alerted by an approaching grampus whale.

First member of the Imperial party to enter was Prince Flavius Domitianus, younger brother of the Crown Prince, who had been recalled from the pleasures of Nicaea, close to the Ligurian-Narbonnian border on the Mediterranean, by his father's severe illness. He peeled off the towelling robe he was wearing to reveal a magnificent compact muscular body, as well-conditioned as that of a gladiator.

Next came Titus himself, smaller, more nervous, more dynamic, his wiry slimness marked by the scars of years of strenuous campaigning on the north-western frontiers where the restless German tribes were forever probing and pushing against the walls of men and masonry that forbade them the loot of soft, civilized peoples within.

The Crown Prince paused for a moment, unembarrassed as a monkey by his nakedness, turned and looked up at the next entry. In Elspeth's ears, as she watched the unfolding drama, the sudden exhalation of Princess Berenice's breath sounded like the hiss of a snake.

Magnificent was the word for Ana Kai-Martinez—Anna Martiana. A murmur of something like awe coursed through the hundreds of pink hairless seals on the scene—of awe mingled with sheer appreciation of an object of beauty whose magnificence put it beyond mere mortal desire.

The supposed Gallic princess towered over men and women alike that stood around her. Elspeth estimated her to be at least an inch over six feet in her unsandaled feet. Long-limbed, full-hipped and deep-breasted, strongly slim of waist, here was a goddess indeed.

Nor did she fail from the neck up. Her head, held erect, was perfectly in proportion with the rest of her, its features commanding, passionate, beautiful. The mouth was full but firm, the nose just missed the stigma of straightness, the cheekbones were sufficiently wide to give the eyes an almost Slavic tilt. The eyes themselves, even from a distance, seemed to flash green fire. The hair that framed this arresting face, rising from a broad, low, intelligent forehead in a provocative widow's peak, was cut short, unlike Elspeth's shoulder-length dark blond tresses or the long black hair of the Roman matrons, and flamed like a copper helmet on her perfectly-shaped head.

Here, Elspeth sensed, was a woman who could love or kill or reward or torture, as the spirit moved her, a spirit directed always by the cold intellect that lurked behind those eyes of green. Elspeth thought, Poor Berenice!—and looked quickly at the Princess, who was studying her rival with a malevolence unmatched in the poetess' not inconsiderable experience.

The Princess caught Elspeth's covert glance and her dark eyes returned the gaze unconquered. Thin lips curled in a faint, mirthless smile and she said, "In truth, my love has been taken by a cannibal queen. We must save him from the stewpot."

Elspeth managed a slight nod, said, "I fear not many men would be averse to such a fate."

"My lover is no fool," was the unconvincing reply. "Nor will he risk an empire by alliance with such a barbarian." To Elspeth, it seemed that her royal friend was whistling in the twilight of the Baths.

She watched the progress of the Imperial party, which seemed headed directly toward them. To her amazement Titus, his face composed as rigidly as if he were personally leading an assault against a phalanx of Scythian swordsmen, strode up to Berenice, stood before her and said, "Princess Berenice—Princess Anna Martiana. We are extremely anxious that the two of you be friends."

The devil!—Elspeth thought as Berenice, refusing to rise and display her tininess along the unadorned king-sized red-head, managed a nod and a formal acceptance of her lover's charge. In a deep husky voice that merely added to her charms the newcomer said in perfect Latin, "His Highness gives me to understand that you know him very well. I shall be grateful to whatever information toward his pleasure you can give me."

**I**T WAS war at first sight, of course. For a moment Elspeth wondered if the Crown Prince were actually a fool. The idea of asking his current love to brief her successor seemed at first thought idiotic. Yet no Roman leader, she had come to discover, was ruled by women. If he let himself be henpecked his leadership was soon discarded.

Even Marc Antony, reputed to have cast away the Empire for love of Cleopatra, had considered women mere playthings, companions and potential mothers, rather than objects of undying affection. At the close perspective given her by *Antique* she had discovered an entirely different version of the Antony-Cleopatra myth than what she had acquired in her ancient history schoolbooks.

The purpose for which first Caesar, then his erstwhile lieutenant had married the Egyptian queen had been political and economic rather than romantic in basis. The facts of the so-called great romance, Elspeth had learned, had been a matter of political haggling, or straight power politics, with the body and heirs of the Egyptian Queen an important factor in the dealings.

Only its near-success had been the foundation of an empty, romantic legend. Politicians, not poets had cleverly created the legend to discredit Antony rather than to idealize him in the eyes of such of his followers and sympathizers as remained.

To the average Roman of good family, the idea of permitting love of any woman to stand in the way of his duties

toward country or career was both shocking and degenerate. *Antique* was a pagan world, where physical love was abundantly available for all and emotional love a suspect rarity save when constricted within the rigid limits of the ancient Roman marriage laws.

Even in a later looser age of Empire, where emancipated women made willing bankrupts of their admirers and divorced unwanted husbands as frequently as they themselves were divorced, no woman in her senses tried openly to steer the ship of state. The idea was as outré in this retarded world as, in Elspeth's own, would be the idea of a ruler selling out his state through unnatural passion.

Hence she doubted the seeming idiocy of Titus in asking friendship between the two warring princesses. And, regarding his expressionless countenance, she sensed that he was putting both women to a cruel test.

He was deliberately setting them against one another, with himself as prize, probably preferring to let one of them destroy the other rather than let himself be torn between them. Sympathizing with the odds against which her friend Berenice must contend, Elspeth felt swift anger at the Emperor-to-be—yet, mingled with anger was reluctant admiration. For truly here was an Imperial maneuver, even if limited to the confines of the Emperor's domestic life.

Berenice was choosing to ignore the magnificent redhead as much as possible, was addressing Titus directly, saying, "Such news as we have of your father, Highness, is not reassuring. I hope he soon turns for the better."

Titus shrugged, replied, "My father is old and much worn by campaigning and the affairs of state. I fear I cannot hold out much hope for his recovery. Hence it is the more important that those close to me unite in friendship and mutual support."

"We hear, Highness," said Berenice. Elspeth followed her dark glance toward Anna Martiana and Domitian, who were now standing a little back behind Titus, caught with her the speculative glance the

Gallic Juno cast at the younger brother, the matching speculation with which it was returned.

There was relief in Berenice's voice as she went on with, "We shall do our best to serve Your Highness in every way possible."

Which, thought Elspeth, did not bode well for the newcomer to the Imperial family circle. Berenice, sensing the treachery of Anna, sensed in it also opportunity for herself and her cause. She was rallying and would fight with all the ruthless wile and cunning a granddaughter of Salome possessed. Elspeth felt better.

The Imperial party moved away then, toward the side of the pool, preparatory to bathing. With their recession some of the retainers behind them became visible—and Elspeth suddenly felt herself blush. She was staring directly at Mack Fraser and Mack was as bare and blushing as she was!

## VII

**F**OR one startled moment Elspeth felt like diving into the pool. It was one thing to wander naked among people who were, after all, strangers and to whom nakedness under such conditions was the accepted condition. It was another to encounter Mack in public with neither of them wearing a stitch.

She saw something close to sheer terror flicker across his somewhat battered countenance. It was followed by excruciating embarrassment as the humor of the situation struck home to her. It was with difficulty that she managed to suppress a snort of laughter. And the increased discomfort with which he regarded her barely-concealed mirth only added to her enjoyment.

She thought, I'd like to paint ugly little Tobey-jug faces on those knobby knees. Something of what she felt must have showed in her face because Mack ducked partially out of sight behind Domitianus and glared at her over the Prince's brawny shoulder. Seeing that no one was paying either of them any at-

tention, Elspeth stuck out her tongue at him. Mack looked shocked at her brazenness.

The Imperial party moved away and Princess Berenice summoned her slaves and allowed her robe to be draped around her. She said to the poetess, "We are grateful for your support, Marina." Then, dropping ceremony, "Come and see me tomorrow." With a quick squeeze of her hand the Princess moved gracefully toward one of the side entrances.

Mack, still looking thoroughly abashed, lingered behind his party as it moved off in the other direction, approached Elspeth with the diffidence of a teen-ager forced to ask a wallflower to dance, said, "Get into the water—I can't talk to you like this. And there isn't much time."

Playtime was ended. Elspeth slipped quickly into the pool and turned in time to see Mack diving in beside her in graceless belly-flopper fashion. He came up alongside her, close to the edge and out of sight of the imperial party, said in English, "What the hell kind of a world have you got yourself into, Elly?"

"I could ask the same of you," replied the poetess, nodding her wet head in the direction of the red-headed Princess.

"Okay." Mack was all business. "I'm glad as hell to see you. The Martinez brought me down here in an air-car yesterday. It seems things are about to pop. She's set to make a deal with Titus, allowing her to loot *Antique* in peace and freeze out the Watchers."

"How do you figure in it?" Elspeth asked softly.

Mack shrugged, looked faintly embarrassed again as he always did when asked to give himself a pat on the back. He said, "The men in Heartland are so hopeless that these she-zombies seem to think I'm an engineering genius. I'm going to be lend-lease and help the Romans put up a few new aqueducts or something as part of the deal." His modesty became grimness as he added, "These Heartlanders are loaded for bear. Your trip the other day put their wind up properly. You'd better get word that things

are warming up."

"I'll pass the word. How much freedom have you got on this job?"

Mack shrugged, wagged his head. "The Heartland men are so cowed their women simply don't expect them to breathe without asking permission. They think I'm a throwback. I can get around, I imagine, if I want to. Inspect something or other, maybe."

"They could be right about that throwback business," Elspeth said tartly. Then, more seriously. "Try to inspect a palace on the Aventine Hill tomorrow afternoon. I'll meet you there."

Mack's brow furrowed. He said, "If it's the palace you mean, I know where it is. That's the place my gang is out to get."

"It's Watcher Headquarters," Elspeth told him. "They may get more than they bargain for."

"I'll be there," Mack told her, added with a trace of mockery, "How will I know you with your clothes on, baby?"

Elspeth splashed water in his face and scrambled out of the pool before he could reach her. Fortunately he was wise enough not to follow her, thus perhaps calling attention to their being together. She half-waved at him as she slipped out of sight to where Lamia waited with her robe.

The slave-girl said, "Who was that man you talked with?"

"An old friend," replied the poetess. And, catching a certain gleam in the Pamphylian girl's dark eyes, "Hands off, Lamia." She wondered, not for the first time, what it was about Mack's generally unlovely exterior that seemed to attract so many women. Of course, if they knew the fine pragmatic sturdiness of the soul within—but the attraction she was considering had nothing to do with soul. Perhaps it meant something—but past experience suggested his concern was more fraternal than passionate. She led the way to the dressing-room in silence.

**O**N HER return to the Cispian villa Elspeth was informed by a house-slave that a woman was awaiting her in

the anteroom. Her first thought, as the visitor rose from the curved Greek chair on which she had been seated was that here was a remarkably tall woman for a Roman, even in comparison to the red-headed Heartland leader masquerading as a Gallic princess. Alarm bells rang again within her at the thought that perhaps this *was* one of the invading Amazons, sent to do away with her.

Instinctively Elspeth's hand flew to her waist, where during the flight to Silesia her blaster had hung in its holster—only to brush the soft material of her stola. Nor was her alarm abated when the visitor leaped toward her and all but smothered her in a fierce embrace.

Elspeth struggled vainly to extricate herself for several seconds before she realized that not a woman but a man was holding her. She jerked back the parka-like hood that shadowed the stranger's features, found herself looking into the eyes of Gnaius Laconius—eyes as frightened as her own.

"You must fly with me," said Gnaius, still holding her close. "I've come to take you away from here." Then, as Elspeth opened her mouth to express surprise, his hand quickly muffled her and he added with angry despair, "Had you not taken advantage of my hospitality I should not have had to flee."

Elspeth sputtered and finally was able to say, "I'm not going to give the alarm, Gnaius. But you must be mad."

"I plead guilty to such a charge," he replied, suddenly sorrowful. "Only a madman would seek you out after the irreparable harm you have done me. But without you I am lost."

Elspeth rallied, her mind beginning to function. She said, "I know not what harm I have done you. Surely the two poor mementoes I took were small return for what I gave you willingly."

Her innocence seemed to stop him in his tracks. He stared at her, gave vent to an ironic laugh, released her and smote his brow. "Truly," he exclaimed, "fate plays curious tricks with me. I had thought myself the victim of conspiracy, with you, Marina, its most treacherous

jewel. Now I find myself the victim of mischance."

"Suppose," said Elspeth, "you make yourself a trifle—"

He cut her off with a tragic gesture, told her, "All the more reason, since it was not you but some petulant goddess that betrayed me, for you to fly with me from a world in which such persecutions can exist." He seized her hands, looked deeply into her eyes.

There was something close to pathos in the floridness of his declamation—and she averted her laughing eyes as if in perplexity. Unexpectedly she saw that his right hand was clutched tightly around some object whose tiny snout protruded from between the covering knuckles—and became aware of the extent of his desperation.

His intention had been to take her with him or slay her if she refused. Her false innocence, she suspected, had momentarily put him off his purpose. For, she remembered, Gnaius Laconius—whatever his name in his true planet home—was one of the Heartland men so despised by Mack and their own Amazonian womenfolk.

Just how he had managed to reach the Rone of *Antique* was a question to whose answer she had not a clue—but she had an idea the answer was a vital part of the problem facing the Watchers and intended to learn the facts.

THE reason behind Gnaius' disappearance was more easily guessed at. Evidently he had awakened shortly after she left him—or perhaps had been roused by an agent of his own people. The theft had been discovered, the other agent and a crew of professional footpads had probably come to the villa, found her already in progress toward the Aventine palace, ambushed her party near the Murcian Gate.

Berenice's remark that Gnaius had been seen within range of that sanguinary combat seemed to Elspeth to prove the point. Doubtless he had held himself well out of harm's way, had fled when the bandits were so disastrously defeated.

From that time on, of course, he was probably in great trouble with his own people—while she herself must have become a thoroughly marked woman to the Heartland leaders.

Dguised as the woman which his society favored, Gnaius must have lurked hidden in the sprawling city. Frowning, she said, "If you are in such danger, Gnaius, why have you lingered in Rome? Surely, if flight lay open to you . . . ?"

"I could not flee until I had seen you, either to take you with me or to decry your guilt and slay you," he replied dramatically. "Now that I know your innocence I must have you with me. Lacking your strength I am lost."

Elspeth made up her mind to go along. Gnaius, she felt certain, was much too poor an actor to be baiting some trap set by others. She said quietly, "Very well, Gnaius, where to?"

Her acquiescence took the wind completely out of his spinnaker. He sputtered, seeking to continue his course of persuasion, then stopped speaking to regard her incredulously and say, "You'll come?"

"Of course," she replied. "If I have caused you unwitting harm it is only right that I should make amends."

He looked at her, horrified, cried, "You come with me but through pity! And I will not be pitied by any woman."

Cursing him for an incorrigible egotist, she sought to mend her fences by melting against him, stroking his arm and saying, "Your heart should tell you pity has no part of what I feel for you." She did not trouble to explain further that her chief feeling toward him was and had always been repugnance.

It worked. He folded her in his ridiculous woman's garment, kissed her with lips for once unrouged, took her hand in a firm grip and said, "Come—this way. My litter awaits."

It did, drawn by four burly ruffians who looked as if they had been culled from the sewers of the city—and smelled the same way. Noting her distaste, the poet said, "They are safe enough."

"Very well," said Elspeth, subsiding

beside Gnaius within the sheltering curtains of the litter. "Where are we going—my dear?"

He peered at her intently and she saw that he needed a shave. He said, "My dear, I must ask you not to be frightened by any strange or wondrous things we encounter. Truly I am taking you with me on a fabulous voyage—a voyage to a land where I am of royal lineage."

Like the sons of the Kings of Ireland in my world, thought Elspeth suspiciously! But with a stir of inner excitement she sensed that instinct had not played her false. Gnaius was planning to take her with him to his own world—perhaps through a gateway as yet unknown to the Watchers. She decided to keep track of the route as the litter was borne through the Esquiline Gate.

"I shall try not to be frightened," she told Gnaius gravely as they turned right beyond the turreted portal. "But where is this land you speak of as yours? Surely it cannot be far from the city."

"It is both far and near," was the reply. "We must pass through a portal of night whose secret I alone know. Once we are safely past its barrier I shall spirit you to a warm ocean island, far from the meretricious intrigues, where together we can compose verses to express the twin glories of our souls."

"You flatter my poor talent," said Elspeth, noting that they turned left on the Via Tusculana, proceeding directly away from the city into the tilled and landscaped story-book countryside that seemed to lap in waves of green grass and brown earth against the very walls of Rome. She began to speculate on whether the matriarchy of Heartland might not implant unexpected weakness in the female sex as well as in the male, might not lead to a means of bringing failure to the triumphant Anna Martiana.

"My story is truly a strange one," Gnaius confided. "So strange that I have dared tell no one in Rome about it. To them I am merely a young man of means who has come to Rome from Utica. Actually, I am from a world both like and different to the world you know."

"Hades, perhaps," offered Elspeth, playing her part.

"Nay, not Hades nor any other land of legend," was the poet's response. "My world is very real. Only by a miracle was I able to find my way into yours—a miracle and a dispensation."

**H**E WENT on with his story—how, although a prince, he had been held in bondage of sort by the Amazons who ran his version of Earth. Elspeth offered at this, "Then you come from the land of these fierce women warriors? You would take me and deliver me into their hands?"

"Nay," he replied again. "It is from them I flee." He told her how he had been quietly approached by a stranger—Gnaius called him a son of the gods to make him more comprehensible to Elspeth—and given instruments that enabled him to make passage between worlds. And, in conclusion, "But my secret, or part of it, was discovered before I could put it to use. But one of the gateways remained in my possession and through this I fled to your world. I longed to escape the bondage of my sex."

"You seem to have done pretty well," said Elspeth, regarding the woman's raiment her companion wore.

He misunderstood her, mercifully, replied, "But they have followed me and seek the few remaining possessions I brought with me. When you took them from me through mistaken desire for a memento of our love, my life became forfeit. Now I must flee again."

"How do you expect to escape death in your own world?" Elspeth asked him, puzzled.

"Because, once through the portal, I know where to hide," was the reply. "Great portions of my world were laid waste by war long before my own time. Yet in the heart of some of these wastelands lie regions untouched by the holocaust that all but destroyed my world. Like oases in the desert they are green and fruitful—and unmarked on any map. It is to one of these that I would flee."

"I see," said Elspeth drily, contem-

plating with a shudder the dismal thought of playing Virginia to Gnaius' Paul in a radioactive-locked Madagascar. She all but blurted "Adam and Eve" before she recollects that she was scarcely supposed to know that myth.

While her companion continued rhapsodically to paint the life they were to live together—with herself, she gathered, doing most of whatever heavy work was to be done—she considered the coincidence of Gnaius and herself, two aliens in a city of perhaps a million souls, managing to land together in such a situation.

Yet, on second thought, it was scarcely remarkable. Elspeth had been on the alert for any alien indications and Gnaius had given her plenty. It was natural for each of them to seek the highest possible circles in the Eternal City, thus to be thrown together in what was actually a small and close-knit society. There her own alien detachment must have drawn him as his own out-of-place modernity interested her. About the only true coincidence, she decided, lay in their both being poets.

Three miles southeast of the city they were borne, in response to a sharp command from Gnaius, off the paved roadway for perhaps two hundred yards, over the brow of a low hill. There Gnaius, after helping Elspeth to alight, paid off the littermen, stood within the shade of a tall poplar, his arm around Elspeth, until they had vanished.

"Come *carissima*," the poet said, the softness of his voice underladen with excitement. "We are about to seek the portal of another world. Come with me!"

They walked perhaps a quarter of a mile over uneven terrain through the latening dusk. Then they came to a ruined farmhouse, an unreconstructed casualty of the civil wars, whose fields were shaggy and overgrown and gone to seed. Gnaius led her to a barn whose thatched roof had partly fallen in, leaving skeleton rafters silhouetted against the pale western sky.

The ship, no larger than a pipit in Elspeth's own world, lay silent on the dirt floor. Except in size it was very

different from any vehicle she had ever seen. Evidently designed primarily for flight rather than surface use, its wheels were many and small. In shape it was something like a sea sledge, with sharply pointed bow and a flat stern from which rocket tubes protruded.

THE cockpit was small but held them both comfortably. The instrument panel was remarkable for its simplicity. Half-reclining in her seat, the poetess watched her companion narrowly as he got the vehicle running. He cast her a quick glance, laid a reassuring hand upon her wrist, said, "Don't be afraid—there is nothing to fear."

Deftly handling the few instruments, Gnaius backed them easily and almost silently out of the barn, swung the sharp nose around and, with a quick burst of power, sent them soaring aloft. Aware of the neatness of the machine, Elspeth understood Mack's concern about the possibilities of a Heartland victory over the Watchers. Certainly it was far more advanced than anything she had ever seen or heard of in any of the other worlds.

There was almost no sense of acceleration, almost no sound, virtually no vibration. They soared high over the vast Pontine marshes and, briefly, out over the Mediterranean itself. In a mere matter of minutes, through the fading twilight, they swung back toward land over the bay of Naples.

Only then did Elspeth feel fright—for it seemed to her that Gnaius planned to crash them against the sloping side of Mount Vesuvius as he rapidly slanted the vehicle downward. He must have sensed her sudden tension, for he cast her a quick smile of reassurance. "I promise," he repeated, "there is no cause for fear. You are being a remarkably brave girl, *carissima*."

"Sure," said Elspeth, holding tightly to the edge of her seat as the rocky mountain swept up toward them, "I'm a whole flock of heroines rolled into one. Well, here goes nothing."

He frowned at her as he slowed his

air-car until it hovered above the rim of the gaping crater, said, "You puzzle me at times, Marina—you are so brazen, so unlike yourself."

"Well, the real me has no desire to commit suicide—not even in a volcano," she replied, letting out a yelp as the walls of the crater itself rose slowly around them. She had a sudden new sense of the date of her mission. As nearly as she had been able to compute it was close to 80 A. D. in *Antique*—and for the first time she remembered that the eruption of Vesuvius which destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum in most of the other worlds took place in 79 A. D. The recollection was scarcely a reassuring one, especially as a curl of subterranean steam took that moment to rise ghostlike past the windows, yellow and sulphurous in the searchlight beam Gnaius had switched on.

She was just about to make an effort to overcome her companion and lift the aircar out of the crater when they moved slightly ahead and came to rest on a sort of shelf projecting from the huge shaft. She cast an inquiring glance at her companion, who was squinting as he studied what appeared to be a clock on the instrument panel. It was marked for twenty hours in numerals which bore only a faint resemblance to the familiar Arabic figures of her world.

"What now?" she asked him, wondering if he had gone mad.

"For a little while we must wait—then, a new world!" was the reply. He reached for her, drew her close, kissed her.

Her response was scarcely electric. The full enormity of undertaking inter-world transfer with such a practical ignoramus as Gnaius scared her out of her wits. She had been informed, before going on the mission to *Antique*, that the worlds of *Antique* and Heartland were in a condition of parallel alignment which made direct transfer between them easy for some time to come.

IT WAS not difficult to visualize Vesuvius as a transfer point—surely the ancient mountain bore both the geologic

and animate hysterical violence that made transfer possible. She wondered briefly what had happened in the forests of Silesia to create such a portal in that desolate region—decided the story belonged to pre-history.

Then she felt the sudden taut tingling of nerves that reminded her of a cat on the eve of a thunderstorm. Idiot or not, Gnaius had timed his expedition well—they were going into transfer almost immediately. Somewhat to her surprise she found herself still in his arms, pulled clear of them and set herself for the ordeal ahead.

Then the darkness was about them—not the dark of night nor of the crater but the almost palpable darkness that was the passage between parallel worlds. It seemed to Elspeth, as always, that she was unable to breathe, yet breathe she did as the unseen moments crept slowly by. At her side she could hear her companion's teeth chatter, resisted an impulse to tell him there was nothing to be afraid of.

Then, when it seemed no longer endurable, the darkness was gone and they were resting on the lip of an eroded Vesuvius with the moon and stars giving them light and revealing a washed out and eroded panorama about and beneath them. Far below, in the great arc of the bay, gleamed a few sparse lights, few even by the standards of the *Antique Roman Naples* over which they had so recently flown. There was a desolation to the landscape reminiscent of Walpurgis Night.

Gnaius suddenly laughed, ringingly, triumphantly, cried, "At last, *carissima*—this is my world!"

"It doesn't look much like an oasis from here," said Elspeth, evading his hungry arms and lips. "It looks desolate."

"And so it is, Marina," he replied. "So it is, save for the few forbidden spots in the great wasteland. Come—let us take off and fly to our private paradise."

Elspeth began to be truly worried. Now, she told herself, was the time to

escape. She had found a gateway, passed through it. Her job now was to get back through it, back to Rome and Mack and Commander de Mestres, so that she could report its presence.

She opened the door at her side and slipped from the air-car, barely escaping the poet's clutching fingers. He cried out in perplexity and she saw him emerge, reaching for his tiny hand-blaster. She wondered fragmentarily if it could be in his heart to kill her.

There was small sense in giving him the chance. As his feet touched the ground she tripped him, pulled his stola over his head, seized his hand while he was struggling in its folds and bit it until the dangerous and ugly little weapon fell clear.

By the time he had unwrapped himself, Elspeth was holding the blaster, pointed at his belly. Speaking English she said, "All right, my fine Heartland friend, not another move."

He looked at her in horrified perplexity and she realized he didn't understand, so she repeated it in Latin, felt a pang of regret as he crumpled under the impact of her words. Pale in the moonlight, he said brokenly, "So you were merely pretending all the time."

"Pretending, Hades!" she exclaimed. "I was performing a dangerous and disagreeable du—" Her voice trailed off as she saw the other aircar approaching.

So fast did it come that she had barely time to slip behind the poet's vehicle before it had landed alongside with a faint scrape of gravel. A couple of tall women got out, said something to Gnaius that seemed to paralyze him. He stammered, tried to speak, could not.

One of the women, apparently the leader, laughed. She said a few words to her companion, in a language Elspeth could not understand, then walked forward and felled Gnaius with a single blow that a slaughterhouse slayer might have envied. The two women bundled the unfortunate poet into their car. Then the leader got in and took off, leaving the other to guard Gnaius' vehicle still unaware of Elspeth's presence.

## VIII

THE Amazon guard leaned against the other side of the aircar behind which Elspeth was hiding. After a while she began to hum a tuneless sort of melody in a low contralto. The poetess wondered briefly what fate lay in store for Gnaius Laconius—probably, if he were a member of an important family, as seemed probable in view of his having been singled out by the first Watcher visitors to Heartland, he would be spanked and confined somewhere. For this Elspeth felt small regret—the poet was too unworldly, too undisciplined emotionally, to be a safe factor if allowed to roam loose among the worlds.

A foot scraped on gravel, then another. The humming stopped. The guard was about to walk around the ship. Elspeth battled an intense desire to take to her heels in flight. She steeled herself, raised the hand-blaster, tried to tell herself that she should have, under the circumstances, no compunction in killing her foe.

Yet, when the Amazon appeared around the nose of the aircar, Elspeth could not put on the pressure that would release the deadly beam of heat. Both women stood there, frozen, for a long second. And then the Amazon's right hand darted for her own belt.

Elspeth fired then—and turned away from the sickening charred mess that lay on the ground in front of her. She scrambled into the aircar, tried desperately to work the strange controls to turn the vessel about. She felt, however illogically, that unless she could turn it around she would never achieve transfer back to *Antique*. She knew something of the two-way oscillation governing the transfer process but, while her mind trusted the knowledge, her emotions refused to.

But the controls were beyond her mastery. She did not dare try to work them all lest she plunge the machine into the now-dead volcano or send it soaring in wild flight, hopelessly away from the interworld portal. After a few desper-

ate moments she sat there, shivering.

It was then that she saw the lights of approaching aircars, heading with definite purpose toward the mountaintop. Evidently Gnaius had talked—and they were coming for her. Feeling as if she were trapped under a falling skyscraper, Elspeth sat helplessly watching their rapid approach, in a sort of paralysis of resignation.

Her fate depended upon the pulse of the interworld rhythm. A transfer would probably occur within minutes—but it could be a matter of days or weeks. Its timing depended upon the frequency of the portal itself, which in turn depended upon its importance as a probability point of decision. Sitting there, with the lights of the approaching flotilla coming rapidly closer, she felt suddenly damp with perspiration that trickled chillingly down her spine and breasts.

If—rather when they reached her, she would be in for a bad time. Heartland was at war with the Watchers and she was an alien spy. Furthermore, in a world dominated by women her sex would scarcely be a protection—quite the reverse. She thought of Mack and, in sudden rage and frustration, struck a useless blow at the instrument panel in front of her.

She hit something that swung the aircar slowly about. Noting the motion, flame flickered from the nose of two of the leading ships and bits of the mountain below her blazed with sudden fire. She looked at her tiny hand-blaster, flung it to the cabin floor.

The aircar stopped moving—and the blackness was around it once more as the very gravel around her seemed to burst into flame. She shivered and thought of Mack and wondered if she would ever see him again. The whole course of their odd, combative relationship passed before her and she all but wept at the uselessness of their squabbles, the stubborn idiocy with which they had each fought dependence upon the other. For surely, if two people were ever meant to be perfect complements, she and Mack were they.

She resolved, if she ever did see him again, to reveal the true warmth of her feelings toward him, her trust in him, her—yes, her love. And then the blackness was gone and she was back on the ledge deep within the crater of the *Antique Vesuvius*—and the aircar was still turning, turning toward the edge.

**E**LSPETH screamed and scrambled out just before it dropped from sight in the bottomless crater beyond. For a long moment she leaned against the volcano wall behind her, trembling and weak and unable to lift a finger.

Then, cursing the awkwardness of her Roman woman's garb, she began the long difficult climb out of the volcano, sure that at any second it would erupt and engulf her in boiling lava. Sulphur fumes made her cough and weep and sharp stones scraped her legs and body and caused her hands to bleed.

Somehow though, under the press of desperation, she made it, lay at last full length on the ground outside the immense shaft that had all but swallowed her alive. After a while she got to her feet and began a staggering progress down the side of the mountain.

Unaided by Gnaius' aircar it took her the better part of two days to get back to Rome. She might not have made it at all had not a kindly Senator, proceeding to an emergency session in the Capital, taken pity on her and given her a place in his suite. He was a plump, perturbed man of middle age, more concerned with animal husbandry and his olive crops than with the intrigues of the city.

But the Emperor was dying and it was necessary for the Senate to meet in rubber-stamp fashion, to appropriate the monies needed for the funeral, to confirm Titus as his successor, to preserve the outer form of a republican process long since moribund. He seemed much interested in such gossip of the city as Elspeth could give him.

Once he said, wrinkling his forehead almost to the top of his bald pate, "I must confess I do not like what you tell

me of the Crown Prince's new favorite. A willful barbarian might well tear Rome apart more fully than Cleopatra herself just now. But I fear the populace will never consent to an alliance with Princess Berenice. Their distrust of all Asiatic rulers is too deep-seated to allow it."

"Poor Berenice," said Elspeth, feeling sympathy for her semi-royal friend. Truly, her life had been incredible, with three marriages before she was well into her twenties. Indeed, Berenice was in a most precarious situation, not only because of popular feeling but because of the rivalry of the Heartland Princess.

It was late the second afternoon after her escape from the crater when, weary, tired and bedraggled, the poetess stood once more before the bronze doors of her Cispian villa. Yet, as one of her Iberian slaves admitted her, she was rousing herself, rallying her energies for what she had to do. She must get at once to the Aventine palace to report to Commander de Mestres. The Vesuvian gateway was no longer a secret to the Heartlanders and, being so close to Rome, might well be the portal to a new invasion of Italy itself by the Amazon warriors of that tired but aggressive world.

And there was Mack, of course. He would probably be angry with her for having stood him up the day before—until she explained what had happened. Then, she foresaw with rosy anticipation, he would give her the devil for taking such chances by herself. Then would come the scene of which she had dreamed while making the return transfer from Heartland—the fond declaration that would end their long feud.

Wondering where Lamia could be, she strode toward her own second-story chamber—and stopped short on the doorsill. Lamia, clad only in the briefest of wispy shawls, was reclining beside Mack on her own couch. A table was pulled up alongside, and on it were two flagons of Pliny's choicest Falernian, one obviously empty, and a bowl of fruit, much of it evidently eaten.

Mack saw her first and lifted a hand in salute. He was evidently feeling the wine, for he grinned with lazy impudence and said in English, "Better late than never, Elspeth. Come on in and join the party."

LAMIA saw her mistress then and leapt from the couch with a little scream. Then she stopped, taking in the poetess' torn and bruised condition; solicitude replaced fright on her provocative little face. She gasped, "Madam you're hurt!"

"You're telling me!" countered Elspeth. She slapped the girl and sent her sprawling, then faced Mack, her eyes blazing, said, "What in hell are you doing here?"

"As a matter of fact," he replied cheerfully, "I'm hiding out. Pal Ana seems to be onto me and I had a devil of a time getting here at all. The whole city's upside down with the Emperor dead." Then, squinting, "Hey, Elly, you do look a bit banged up. Better have a snort to pull yourself together." He offered her the unfinished flagon and she knocked it out of his hand to the floor.

Lamia, on her knees, cried, "Madam, I didn't want to, but when Macronius Frazius came last night he demanded entertainment."

Elspeth felt her anger toward the sobbing girl dissolve. She lifted her up, said, "Get my bath ready," then turned on Mack when she had darted from the room with, "I'd forgotten what a tomcat you are."

On his feet, he shrugged, replied, "She's a cute little dish. What did you want me to do while you wandered off with that cute poet of yours? You know I can't even read in this language."

With great effort she put personal problems behind her. She said, "I've got to get to Commander de Mestres at once. I've been through a new gateway in Mount Vesuvius."

"In Mount Vesuvius!" The fumes of wine seemed visibly to fade as his alert practical mind seized on the problem they faced. "You mean you've been into

Heartland and back through the crater?"

She nodded, said, "What's more, the Heartlanders know of the gate there now. They may decide to use it themselves."

"It wouldn't surprise me if they already have," said Mack quietly. "My brick-topped girlfriend is really making things hum. That's part of why I had to get out. But how in hell we're to get into the Aventine palace beats me. Titus camped four legions around it this morning." He paused, added, "Nice fellow, that de Mestres."

Elspeth made no response. The neatness with which Ana Kai-Martinez, or Anna Martiana, had used her influence over the heir to *Antique* Rome stopped her cold. She had news of vital importance to convey to Commander de Mestres—but if the Aventine palace was under siege, as Mack implied, there was no way of getting word to the forces of the Watchers.

The problem remained unsolved during her bath—which, though the water was hot, suffered from a noticeable coolness between mistress and slave. Elspeth abstracted and unhappy, spoke only when necessary to the Pamphylian girl, who waited on her in silence.

Not until the massage was finished did Lamia blurt, "Madam, if I have offended you I am heartbroken."

Elspeth rolled over on the sheet-covered massage table and smiled at the anxiously alive little face above her. She said with an unexpected sense of relief, "I'm not angry with you, Lamia—but I'd like to wring the neck of our mutual friend in the next room."

And then, remembering the girl's resourcefulness, an idea struck her. She sat up and said, "Lamia, do you think you could manage to carry a message to the Commander of the force within the Aventine palace?"

Eagerness and excitement flooded the little slave-girl's face. "If it will be of service to madam . . ." said the girl submissively, but her eyes were aglow at the prospect of adventure. Elspeth then wrote a brief note in English to the Commander, telling him of the Vesuvian

gateway and her fear lest the Heartlanders should employ it to launch an expedition to Italy proper.

**W**HEN Lamia had left and Elspeth was clad once more in tunic and sandals, she went down to the dining chamber, where Mack was awaiting her. He had sobered up considerably and was looking both sheepish and a trifle hung over. He said, "I hope you weren't too hard on the kid. I was way out of line but I didn't know this poet character was part of your assignment."

"Lamia's merely running an errand for me," said the poetess. Then, as the first course was brought in, "Mack, what about these people? How long have you been on this job?"

"About four months," he told her. Then, slashing into the suckling pig and smearing both face and hands, he sighed, "This is living, Ely. If I hadn't stolen time off to get some game I'd have had to live exclusively on bran muffins and yoghurt. You've been having it good."

"You haven't done so badly yourself," said Elspeth a shade tartly. "What about that Glamazon boss of yours?"

Mack had the grace to blush.

Elspeth laughed. She couldn't help it. The picture of Mack being reduced to inferior status by a proud woman who outstripped him physically was salve to her own recently bruised ego. But she said, "Poor Mack. How'd you ever manage to get established with them anyway?"

"It was pretty much makeshift all the way," he replied in English, since a classical education had not been part of his training. "The first Watcher who reached Heartland walked into a radioactive zone before he knew it and came down with a fatal case of poisoning. If he hadn't been half out of his head he'd never have selected a man as resident Watcher. But he was dying and handed the torch to some decadent prince, who tried to use the gift for his own ends."

"I know," said Elspeth quietly, thinking of Gnaius.

"You don't know what Heartland is like," was Mack's reply. He seemed to shudder visibly, then went on with, "It's the used up end of a world that's knocked itself out with war. There's life in some of the forbidden areas—and they comprise Asia, Africa, both Americas, Australia, England and Antarctica—but you wouldn't want to see it."

"Mutations?" Elspeth asked, shivering herself.

He nodded. "Some beauts—and every one of them recessive. It's a starving world that's forgotten most of its own existence. But they've got machines left—some lulus. You've had a taste of their technical stuff. The trouble is they operate by rote. They've lost the knack of new ideas—probably scared to death of them after the destruction their planet has taken."

"So I got through the Silesian transfer point and made like a character from one of the borderland provinces," he said, half piling his plate with greens. "Anyway, I fixed up a couple of gadgets that were out of whack and got myself marked as a genius, masculine gender."

"Clever, clever fellow," said Elspeth. Mack glowered at her, then went on.

"Understand, no man can rate as an equal with the Heartland ladies, Ely," he said, "I was just a talking horse with them. So they kept me warm and fed and discussed me as a potential menace if more like me turned up. Finally, just before I got the Silesian mine job, I began to get hep to what was happening."

"The damned fool our pioneer made resident Watcher had spilled the beans, of course, then taken a powder through another gateway. Which left just the Silesian portal. But that was enough. It was right on top of Heartland's last worked-out uranium bed and the Martinez got the idea of bringing through an expedition and replenishing her planet with radioactives pirated from this world."

"I made a quick transfer and outlined the setup to Mr. Horelle and he sent me right back and told me to go along with it. So I did. I helped get the diggings

working, while the Martinez was looking around and discovering this world wasn't full of deadly continents and might have a lot more uranium mines. Needless to say, I didn't tip her off to the Congo or Northwest Canada.

"She took a trip and tied up with this Titus in France—or Gaul," Mack went on, "and from then on things went into high gear. She sent a few spies to Rome—a few of the Heartland men make good undercover operatives—and found out her missing prince was hiding out here. And from then on the operation was stepped up."

**E**LSPETH nodded and, over dessert, they chatted about their problem. Shaking his head, Mack said, "Somehow we've got to get word to de Mestres. I was lucky to have a chance to talk with him before my lady-boss got suspicious of me. One of her damned spies saw us talking in the pool and it seems you're already suspect."

"Sorry," said Elspeth. "But I wonder why they haven't made an attack here yet. Surely they must know you're with me."

Mack shrugged, then said, "You haven't seen the city for the past couple of days. Ever since the Emperor died it's been a madhouse—crowds, games, public sacrifices, parades, street-corner speeches, drunks, bandits, a real bedlam. I've got a hunch they haven't many operatives here—and those they have have been too damned busy to bother much with a couple of minor issues like us."

"They'll get to us in time, never fear," said the poetess.

"I don't," was the far from reassuring reply.

A round-eyed slave interrupted the meal with word that the Princess Berenice requested entrance. Elspeth issued hurried instructions in Latin and, when the slave had departed on the run, Mack looked at the poetess with reluctant admiration. "You certainly know how to spout this damned lingo around here," he told her.

"Advantages of a classical education,"

she retorted. "In spite of your scorn for dead languages they do come in handy at times."

"Maybe," replied Mack, "but it took a freak cosmic disaster to turn the trick."

The Princess came in without ceremony, brushing quickly past the slaves. She sank onto a couch saying, "Thank Astarte, I'd forgotten there was such a thing as food."

Not until she had satisfied the sharp edge of her hunger did Elspeth have a chance to introduce her to Mack, who nodded gravely, saying nothing. He looked, the poetess thought, absurdly like an unwilling guest at a costume ball in her own world.

After studying him briefly the Princess said, "Is your guest a mute barbarian that he doesn't talk? He must be a relief after poor Gnaius. Have you heard anything from him?"

"Nothing, Highness," said Elspeth. "I fear for his fate." Then, with a sidelong glance at Mack, "Macronius Frasus is an old friend. He is not a barbarian but he does not speak Latin."

The Princess said with some surprise, "Not a barbarian, yet not able to speak the language of civilization? Perhaps he comes from Cathay."

"What in hell are you talking about?" Mack asked in English. His head had been turning back and forth between the women like a sideline spectator at a tennis match.

Elspeth laughed and said to him, "Princess Berenice is curious about you. I'm trying to explain."

"You'd think I was a freak or something," growled Mack with a surly expression.

"What is this strange tongue you speak with your friend?"

"It is a dialect from a distant part of Britain," the poetess replied. "Macronius hails from there and we shared the same slave-tutor as children."

"It is a rapid tongue, mused Berenice. "But Rome is full of strange tongues at present. Is not this the young man who appeared in Princess Anna Martiana's suite at the Baths?"

"The same," said Elspeth. "But he is no friend of hers. He is, in fact, hiding from the princess and her followers."

"So!" said Berenice after a thrusting glance at the subject of the conversation. Then, with a shrug, "Perhaps he can be of service, as I hope you can, in my campaign against this barbaric invader. For I fear for my place in Rome if her power over the new Emperor is not sapped. Titus has stripped me of half of my suite—and there is gossip abroad that he plans to install this—barbarian witch in my palace."

Save for the slight hesitation in her last sentence Berenice spoke with a calm matter-of-factness that wrung Elspeth's heart.

Turning to Mack she said, "Princess Berenice is in danger of being ousted from the Emperor's favor by your ex-boss. Do you know any chinks in her armor? We've got to do something, for our own sakes as well as hers. Can you think of anything?"

MACK looked thoughtful and said after a long moment, "Damned if I know any—unless it's her contempt for men. You might be able to get her to humiliate the Emperor."

It was Elspeth's turn to think. She frowned, saying, "The chances are she won't show her hand until she has the game in hand—and we can't wait that long. Darn it!" She frowned and then, out of nowhere, an idea occurred to her.

She saw in retrospect, without closing her eyes, the mutual speculative glance exchanged at the side of the pool between the red-headed menace and the new Emperor's younger brother. Domitianus, she knew from rumor, was both jealous and ambitious, a young man who was impatient of his chances of sitting on the throne. Perhaps something could be made of that.

She glanced at Berenice, read the curiosity in her eyes, said, "I wonder, if Domitianus received a note from her, asking him to come to a rendezvous at a time and place we know Princess Anna Martiana will be present, and some

trusted servant were to warn Titus at the last minute—but no, it is a clumsy subterfuge."

"You noticed too—at the Baths," said the Princess Berenice, her face alive with eagerness and renewed hope. "I thought my eyes must have deceived me out of wishfulness. Marina, you are indeed a friend. Though why my poor wits could not supply the answer—"

"You'd have thought of it, Highness," said Elspeth consolingly. Suddenly she felt quite proud of her newly-developed talent for court intrigue. It felt so—Persian was the only suitable word. There was another word too, of course, one far less romantic—Machiavellian. But, she reminded herself, when in Rome . . . certainly Mack seemed to have accepted Roman hospitality with unequivocal enthusiasm.

Princess Berenice rose and, when Elspeth stood up after jerking her head at Mack to get that erratic social performer on his feet, moved around the table and embraced her. Elspeth felt surprise at the frailty of her guest's body, marveled at the indomitable will that had maintained her close to power for so long, when stronger men and women and far greater reputations fell almost daily.

She accompanied Berenice to the door, Mack trailing uncertainly behind, saw her to her well-guarded litter, which all but blocked the narrow street outside. There the poetess remained, to wave farewell to a jeweled and shapely arm which saluted her through the rift in the litter curtains, which were gay with the lion of Judah and the eagle of Rome.

Thus she was still standing in the lighted doorway when the bundle, hurled from somewhere in the darkness beyond the oval of torchlight, landed with a horrid thud in front of her feet and brushed her ankles as it bounded past her and rolled into the doorway. Involuntarily she shrank back with a slight scream.

Moments later, her eyes bulging with horror, she watched disgust followed by deadly anger cross Mack's familiar face as he opened the bundle to disclose the bloody, severed head of Lamia!

## IX

**T**HE happenings of the next few hours were, to Elspeth, like passages in a nightmare—dramatic, terrible, unescapable. For even in that ghastly moment, while she and Mack gazed at the lifeless head of the vivid little slave-girl, Elspeth knew that they were trapped.

The Heartland invaders appeared to have every contingency covered. With a new transfer point close to Rome, they could easily counter-effect the strength of the Watchers' contingent in the Aventine palace. With the support of Titus and his legions in the capital itself, thanks to the Martinez' successful intrigue, they had sealed off de Mestres' forces so that it was impossible to get word to them of what was going on outside the crumbling walls of their citadel.

Any haphazard show of force by the Commander's troops would inevitably turn the rulers of *Antique* even more strongly against the Watchers, would place them more securely in the hands of the planet looters. Elspeth felt sick, not only at the brutal slaying of Lamia, but at the prospect of the matriarchy in full control of *Antique*.

It would not take them long to discover the huge sources of untapped mineral wealth in the retarded planet—even in regions so long poisonous in Heartland that their existence had been all but forgotten by the people of that unfortunate version of Earth.

Mack, suddenly the grim-faced man of her own world, said, "Come on, Elly—we've got to get the hell out of here."

"Where can we go?" the poetess asked helplessly.

"We've got to get a message to de Mestres," said Mack. "And if I have to, I'll blast a way through to the palace myself."

Elspeth moved uncertainly to her room. But once out of sight of the ghastly relic of Lamia, her thoughts began to organize themselves. She said, "You haven't a chance—we haven't a chance just now. I suggest we entrust that part

of the job to Berenice. She still has some friends and influence. If anyone can get a message through to de Mestres, she can. Maybe not for a day or two but soon—with the city demoralized as it is."

Mack frowned. "Okay," he said, "but what do we do in the meantime—sit here and wait to be slaughtered?"

"Mack!" said Elspeth. "Mack—we've got to get to that Vesuvian gateway and block it somehow. Suppose no one can get word to de Mestres in time—it's up to us."

"And what do we use for transport?" countered the more practical member of the team. "Besides, don't tell me our friends won't have every road from Rome blocked—at least to us."

"There is still Pliny and the fleet," she said.

"Too damned slow," was the discouraging response. "Even if we made it we'd never be in time."

"But it's the only way left," said Elspeth. She felt sudden reaction from her slave's tragic murder, felt tears well up unwanted behind her eyes. Suddenly she could restrain them no longer. The pressures of recent days, Lamia's death, the hopelessness of the position—all united and burst from her in weeping.

Mack offered her clumsy comfort, repeating over and over again, "Come on, Elly, snap out of it. We've got to get going!"

Red-nosed and sniffing, she finally managed to write a note to Berenice in Latin, and one to the Commander in English, apprising him of the situation outside the walls of his palace prison. Enclosing one within the other, she entrusted the mission to the stoutest and most resourceful of her remaining Iberians, ordering him to leave by climbing the portico balustrade and climbing down the face of the Cispian hill on which it fronted, thus, she hoped, evading the spies and sentries at the street entrance.

"We'd best leave together," said Mack. He had pulled from under the bed a small but apparently heavy suitcase, was checking its contents. He

noted Elspeth peering at some of the odd gadgetry it contained—gadgetry utterly alien to her experience—said, "I was going to turn this stuff over to Mr. Horelle but if we're going to blow up Vesuvius we'll need a few explosives."

"Heavens, Mack, I'd forgotten!" said Elspeth, realizing the futility of her swift planning unbacked by Mack's practicality.

"We'll give 'em something to remember us by," Mack said grimly, closing the case with a snap and checking its fastenings. "It's a good thing I brought a few samples with me when I scrambled."

"Yes, Mack," she said, wanting desperately for him to hold her in his arms and give her, however briefly, the illusion of safety.

BUT Mack's mind was not on her. It was on avenging Lamia's murder and, more intently, upon their making a getaway. He eyed Elspeth's clothing, then his own, shook his head. Then, from another suitcase, he procured coveralls of some light, warm material, evidently of Heartland origin. He tossed her a pair.

They quickly got into the more practical garb of a more advanced version of Earth. The Iberian procured a stout rope and, after fastening it to a pillar of the balustrade, they began their descent.

The cuts on Elspeth's hands from her climb out of the crater a few days earlier were quickly reopened by the coarse fibers of the rope and the rough bark of the trees that got them down the hill. But she barely noticed the injuries in her desperate hurry. The Iberian led, with Elspeth second and Mack and suitcase bringing up the rear. Each time the Iberian reached firm footing, Mack would hand the bag down to Elspeth, who would transfer it to the slave below. Then they would begin the slow process all over again.

They parted company on the Via Subura, the Iberian darting into an alley to work his way toward Berenice's palace, Mack and Elspeth, their coveralls

now hidden by toga and stola, lugging the suitcase toward the river and the small naval basin on the Tiber River island across the Pons Fabricius. As far as they could discover their flight had not been watched and they were not followed.

The nightmare continued for Elspeth as they fought and pushed their way through foul-smelling half-drunk street crowds, working around the fringes of the great Forum to avoid being spotted by agents of their foes.

Once they had to pause while a legion, recalled from the provinces, marched across their path on its way to the Palatine. And despite the urgencies of their situation the poetess could not help but thrill at the sight of the eagles and fasces, the reflections of torchlight on glittering bronze-and-steel armor and helmets and weapons—the raw stirring notes of the immense curled horns and the measured tramp of heavy service sandals on cobblestones.

Mack shook her roughly to snap her out of her reverie as the last detachment of legionnaires marched past. "Come on," he urged. "Let's step on it!"

When at length a sentry challenged them at the Fabrician bridge the game was up to Elspeth entirely—for Mack, of course, could not speak Latin. She asked to be taken to the admiral, was informed that he was asleep on his flagship and could not be disturbed. But she finally managed to be taken to the officer of the watch aboard and there raised such a clamor that at last old Pliny appeared, blinking away sleep, and had Mack and herself taken to his cabin.

"Nice going; Elly," Mack said softly then and she felt much like an Arthurian knight just promoted to Round Table status.

Within half an hour they were under way, the gilded wooden flagship with its single bank of muffled oars, shipped mast and furled single sail cutting through the smooth water in magic silence. Standing on the poop, with Mack

at her side, the poetess watched the glowing reflections of a city alive with torches and flambeaux as they barely made clearance with shipped oars under the low Tiber bridges.

She caught a glimpse of the eroded walls of the Aventine palace, silhouetted against the glowing night-sky of the city. All about it glowed the fires of the encamped legions, supposedly bivouacked for the funeral and coronation processions but actually sealing de Mestres' men and machines with an airtight ground blockade.

She wondered what would happen if de Mestres decided to take action and sent his flying armor over the walls, spitting flame and missiles at the primitive weapons of the legionnaires. It would provide a spectacle never before recorded in the history of any of the worlds—a spectacle far more horrible and magnificent than any the new-built Colosseum of Rome would ever know.

"I hope the Martinez can get Titus to keep his boys in hand," said Mack, looking worried. "A blow-up now would queer the works."

"I wish we had your pipit," replied Elspeth illogically.

"You and me both," replied Mack. "Look at the way they make those poor devil's sweat!" He nodded toward the half-open decks ahead and below them, in which they could see the scarred and sweating backs of oarsmen, bending to with a will under the threat of the lash.

"It looks like a cinema," said Elspeth. "It can't be real."

"It's real, all right," said Mack gloomily. "And if we don't knock these Heartland so-and-sos out of the picture these people are going to be in for a lot more of it. Our friends didn't wreck their own world by being humanitarians."

"A pity!" exclaimed the poetess. "Think of the chance to watch the culture of a world develop, to see its artists at work, its builders, its philosophers, its spiritual leaders! Think of the understanding it would give us for all other worlds!"

"Yeah," replied Mack drily, "and

think of all the famines and torturing and wars and pillage and rape and disease this world will know if we don't step in and give them a few of our benefits!"

"It might be worth all that," said Elspeth defensively.

"*You* can say that," Mack retorted, "because you aren't one of them. How would you like to starve or die of some plague or—or have your head cut off simply because we didn't step in and speed up the growth-process? Would you really enjoy it?"

"You're right, of course," replied Elspeth a trifle sadly. She thought of Lamia, who had died for her so recently, of some of the inhuman horrors she had been compelled to witness at games in the Colosseum.

They reached Ostia well before dawn and without incident. There they transferred, along with the Admiral, to a huge swift trireme, whose prow and stern were too lofty to pass under the Tiber bridges, whose oarsmen were fresh and unwearyed by the pull downriver.

**D**AWN was rising when they put out from the harbor at the mouth of the famous stream, leaving behind them the still-dark fronts of the surprisingly tall four-and-five story warehouses and apartment buildings along the waterfront, moving serenely among the scores of galleys and smaller craft, the bright colors and giltwork of their ornate stems and figureheads reflecting the first rays of early light.

But once in the open water of the Tyrrhenian Sea, they struck rough water and favorable winds. The great sail went slowly up the mainmast, billowing like some immense pink parachute as it filled. Oars were shipped and the big war-vessel plunged through mounting waves at a good clip without manual aid.

Elspeth descended to an aft cabin, where Mack, under the inquisitive regard of the Admiral, was assembling a bomb from materials hastily brought aboard before they left Ostia. He seemed unmoved, as was Pliny, by the rolling

and pitching of the galley, went about his work with methodical efficiency.

Elspeth was forced to act as interpreter between the curious Pliny and her colleague. "What sort of a machine are you making?" she asked. "Our pal here wants to know."

"Tell him," said Mack, rubbing an arm across a grimy face, "That I'm trying out a sort of guncotton to be triggered by a couple of Heartland percussion caps. You might ask him if he hasn't an atom bomb stowed somewhere in his hold."

Elspeth repeated this message in Latin as best she could, then turned to Mack and asked, "Do you think it will do the work?"

"It ought to kick up a bit of fuss if Vesuvius is active at this time on this world," he replied, added, "And if we can detonate her deep enough down the shaft. Now shut up and let me work."

Later, lying on a bed of torment from the unfamiliar rocking of the boat the poetess felt intense homesickness for Lamia and the care and service to which she had become accustomed in her nine-odd weeks of residence in the Admiral's Cispian hill villa. Tears rolled down her face as she recalled the slave-girl's gaiety, the unswerving devotion with which she had sacrificed her life for her mistress.

After a while, mercifully, she slept....

Thanks to the following wind, which stayed with them all the way, they were able to make the harbor at Misenum late the following afternoon. While the galley was rowed through the calmer waters of the Bay of Neapolis, Elspeth recovered somewhat from her malaise of the night before and, after downing a bowl of broth, managed to pull herself together and stagger upon deck.

There the fresh salty air revived her further, as did the magnificent sweep of the bay, dotted with villas of pink and white and pale blue and backed by the Fuji-like cone of the big volcano. The panorama reminded her of murals in a Chelsea or Greenwich Village Italian restaurant with its gay bright colors and

knife-sharp contrasts between dark and light.

Truly, she thought, there was beauty in this fantastically retarded world—beauty of spirit and feeling as well as in outer garb. Her own spirit soared anew and she watched Mack directing a quarter of brawny picked sailors in the assembly of his explosives for debarkation.

"Think you're up to the climb?" Mack asked her when they stood on the pier. She nodded and after a doubtful moment he said, "Good—after all, you've been up there and I haven't. I'll get you a burro."

Slowly they made their way up the foothills of Vesuvius as the sun set behind the massive shoulder of the sea behind them. As twilight thickened into darkness Pliny exclaimed when Mack produced a powerful electric torch to light their way up the mountain, and his aide and the three sailors who made up the rest of the party murmured uneasily at this sudden magic.

"Tell them it's okay," said Mack. "I'd let them use torches but if our Heartland pals should come through I want to turn this light off in a hurry. Tell them it's good magic."

Elspeth did as best she could and, their initial surprise over, the men seemed to accept it with increased faith in the purpose of their mysterious assignment. But Gaius Plinius Secundus' questions were a lot harder to answer—and ultimately she had to serve as harassed interpreter while Mack tried to explain the functioning of an electric flash-lamp to the scientist-Admiral.

**T**HEY were within a few hundred yards of the near rim of the crater when a droning sound from within it caused Mack to douse his light quickly and snap an order at Elspeth to tell the others to hold still where they were. She had barely repeated it when a beam of light rose from the crater and a sharp-nosed Heartland aircar came bursting out of the mountain and rose rapidly in the heavens.

"Damn!" Mack exploded. "We're

too late."

"Wait—we'd have seen them coming through if they were really operating," replied Elspeth more hopefully. "If this is a single scout it will go back for information and further orders."

Mack ignored her suggestion, burst into lurid profanity as the picked sailors, terrified at sight of the Heartland aircar, coming so soon after Mack's flash-lamp, decamped noisily, shouting their alarm as they stumbled and ran down the side of the mountain. Mack, the Admiral and Elspeth remained alone with the burros.

"Some mob you've got!" Mack exploded at the Admiral.

Elspeth, not wishing to make a bad situation worse, said in Latin, "It's a pity your men are not as staunch as yourself, Admiral."

"They have not been educated to the scientific mind, which is curious rather than afraid of the unknown," replied Pliny shortly, through the chattering of his teeth. Admiring his bravery in terror, Elspeth felt warm sympathy and liking for her prosy and somewhat dull little sponsor in the Eternal City.

"You may be right, Elly," said Mack suddenly at her elbow. He pointed at what seemed to be a shooting star falling toward the top of the mountain. The Heartland scout was a scout after all. It was returning to the transfer point to report its successful passage into *Antique*.

When at last it vanished below the rim of the crater Mack said, "Come on—let's put the show on the road. Elly, skin a couple of those damned mules. At least they didn't run."

"Burros—not mules," said Elspeth as she grabbed hold of a couple of halters. Moving at a fatiguing pace, Mack led his two remaining companions rapidly up the steep slope that led to the shaft in the volcano.

When at last they peered cautiously down into the immense shaft it was empty and dark as if nothing had transpired within its perpendicular walls. The Admiral stared down into it as if stunned,

then said to Elspeth in his flawless Latin, "I am afraid of what you are about to do—yet I am more afraid of the machine that disappeared."

"It's got to be done," Elspeth told him practically, her own resolve hardened at sight of the Heartland aircar. Then, in English, "Mack, we'd better get this business over with. More of them will be coming through at the next opening of the portal."

"Right," said Mack. Then, in the act of unslashing the packs on the burros, "You know, Elly, this isn't a very good gateway from the point of view of putting a large-sized expeditionary force through. They have to come single file—not all at once like Commander de Mestres and that force of his."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," said Elspeth, staggering under a bulky package which Mack shoved into her arms. Yet his optimism did much to lift her own spirits. Mack's usual approach to any problem was in a mood of skeptical pessimism.

It took him a quarter of an hour to assemble his bomb and encase it in three layers of beef-hide to protect it from damage as it rolled into the crater. He had encased the timer—a shockproof Heartland super-gadget—in the guncotton itself as an added precaution against breakage, after setting it twelve minutes ahead.

Finally, while the timer ticked faintly and ominously, he sewed the outermost of the hide coverings together and gave the outsized volley-ball that resulted an almost careless push that sent it rolling over the edge and deep into the bowels of the Earth.

"Here's hoping she works," he said with a smile in the moonlight, holding up crossed fingers. "If she doesn't—"

"Look!" Elspeth pointed down into the crater, where the familiar shelf was suddenly ablaze with artificial light as a Heartland air-cruiser suddenly appeared. It was an ugly-looking ship, boasting a number of turrets and gun emplacements from which protruded the ugly muzzles of exotic cannon mounted

singly and in pairs.

"By all the gods, including even the Christian!" exploded Pliny, gazing at the scene below with his mouth agape. "What manner of thing is that?"

"A very bad manner of thing," said Elspeth. Mack, she saw, had removed his toga in favor of his coveralls and she did the same. Then, moving swiftly and letting the burros roam as they would, the three of them began their descent down the steep side of the volcano.

"The further away from that ship we get the happier I'll be," Mack panted. "What a deadly looking job! I've never seen that one before."

"I hope they haven't got many like her," said Elspeth.

A little further on, as they stopped for breath, she felt a faint jar in the volcano beneath them. "She went off," said Mack. "Now we'll see what—"

He stopped talking as, after a long moment of silence, the mountain began to shake more violently and a hissing roar sounded through the thickness of its side. Almost at once a shriller sound made itself heard—or rather felt.

"What's that?" the poetess asked, beginning to be frightened.

"A ship—trying to get altitude in a hurry." A grin flashed across his battered face. "We must have kicked up some hell with that gizmo." He laughed and added, "Hell, it was put together with spit."

The Heartland cruiser suddenly appeared above the rim of the crater, from which a redder glow than the vessel's headlights was beginning to make its fitful appearance. The ship shot directly upward and seemed to hang in the air perhaps a hundred yards above the summit of the volcano, its rocket tubes ablaze.

Then, with a roar too loud for human ears, the mountain seemed to explode. A sudden burst of bright white flame shot directly upward into the sky. It caught the Heartland cruiser and, for an instant, there was a blob of extra brilliance in the pillar of heat. Then—nothing but nature blowing her top.

**E**LSPETH ceased playing the role of spectator as panic overwhelmed her and raced, stumbling, down the mountainside. More than once she fell, only to pick herself up, panting, and continue her flight.

To her left a blazing fragment seemed to settle slowly to the ground—only to land with a crash that sent flaming tracers rising in all directions. She cried out and flinched as something stung the side of her neck. Her racing footsteps veered to the right, only to be turned again as another ball of fire struck and flared up almost in her face.

She shook free as a hand gripped her shoulder, struggled against arms that swept her off her feet, only relaxed when Mack's voice penetrated her terror with, "Not a chance that way, Elly. Here!"

She was being carried upward, then across level ground, then dumped unceremoniously under a sheltering rock overhang. Mack scrambled in beside her and held her close against his chest until some measure of rationality returned. At last, utterly wrung and, for the time being, beyond terror, Elspeth finally managed to say unevenly, "Sorry, Mack—I didn't mean to—"

"You and me both," he replied. "If I hadn't seen you running right into those fireballs I'd still be running myself."

The area was still being bombarded in a display of cosmic pyrotechnics. Fascinated, Elspeth watched it, then said, "At least it doesn't look as if Pompeii and Herculaneum were going to be buried in hot ashes this time."

Mack shrugged, replied, "It's too early to tell yet." Then, peering at her, "You got a blister on your neck."

Elspeth felt the mark left by the blazing volcanic spark and it began to hurt, where before she had not noticed. She looked around, then asked, "What about the admiral—where is he? Is he okay?"

Mack shook his head and said quietly, "Afraid not, Elly. One of those flaming hunks of rock landed on him."

She buried her face in her hands. In a way, though she had really seen little of him, she had become fond of the resident Watcher, despite his constant curiosity, respectably channeled in the name of science. Wearily she considered the deaths that seemed to be as much a part of an interplanetary mission as of a major engineering project. She wondered if the good they did in any way compensated for the loss of even one first-class life. Or did they do good?

The mountain shook dangerously beneath them and less sharp but longer explosions sounded from the crater. "How does it look, Mack?" she said. "Think we're going to get out of this?"

Mack opened his hands and said, "I'd hate to make book on it. But let's take a look. The fireballs seem to have stopped."

They moved out from beneath the overhang to study their situation. Elspeth discovered that they were on a jutting outcrop from the general slope of the mountain, almost a spur. There was a level surface, a sort of tiny plateau, in front of their rock shelter, perhaps fifty feet in length and thirty feet broad at its widest.

LOOKING back at the crater Elspeth again felt the grip of panic. What looked like white-hot liquid was spilling out over the brim, its glow blanking the stars. Even as she watched, its area spread unevenly down the side of Vesuvius. It seemed to be flowing directly toward the little plateau on which she and Mack stood.

"Mack!" she said, pointing to it. "Let's get out of here."

He turned reluctantly and his face was grim against the light of the glowing lava. He pulled her to the edge of the plateau for answer, and pointed beneath. "Looks like we're stuck," he said, shouting into her ear to make himself heard as the mountain boomed again.

She felt her heart do a nose-dive. Another crater had been opened by the force of the induced eruption and already lava was spreading from it down the hillside

beneath them. They were cut off, isolated on the plateau.

They sat down under the rock overhang once more, finding solace in each other's company. They could do little talking, even if they were of a mind to—the volcano was making far too much noise. After a while they went out again to see how things were going, discovered, during a lull in the sounds that had been enveloping them, that they were now on an island, completely surrounded by rising flows of lava.

"Not so good, is it?" said Elspeth, fighting the trembling of her lower lip. What she really wanted to do was bawl like a baby.

Mack didn't bother with answering. Instead he looked at her closely, almost as if for the first time, and said, "You know, Elly—now that I've gotten used to you, you're a sort of attractive wench."

"So what do we do now?" she said, inexplicably resentful of his appraisal. "Go back to our cave and make animals of ourselves?"

"It's an idea," he replied. "After all, we haven't much time."

Perhaps it was the practicality of the proposal—perhaps it lay in its coldness, in the fact that Mack had made no mention of love. Yet whatever the reason Elspeth, who had for long months wanted nothing more than Mack's embrace, felt suddenly, irrationally, furiously angry. She said, "Drop dead; will you?"—and at once felt sick for her words.

Mack eyed her a moment longer, then shrugged and dropped his cigarette and ground it out carefully underfoot as if afraid of starting a forest fire. He said, "Stay out here if you want to—me, I'm going back under the rock and try for some shuteye."

"Somebody ought to keep watch," Elspeth replied.

"For what—a fairy godmother riding on a star-beam to rescue us with a wave of her wand?" He left her there and once he was gone she felt a quick clamoring urge to run to him. Knowing him, she felt certain he had come as close to telling her he loved her as he

was capable of doing. "Now that I've gotten to know you you're a sort of attractive wench—" There were words of passion to make any girl melt proudly into his arms! Yet she had a suspicion plenty of girls had so melted with even less provocation. She cursed herself for being seventeen kinds of a romantic fool. After all, she rebuked herself, she was scarcely a prize.

**W**HILE she stood there the lava continued to narrow the confines of their little plateau. The explosions had ceased for some time and a dark, smoke-blanketed dawn was no more light than the night had been around them.

Elspeth thought of Mack, lying there, awake and afraid, waiting for her to come to him. She thought of Lamia and the Martinez and certain others she had known about and decided that Mack, if anything was not good enough for her. She made up her mind that if he really wanted her he was going to have to call for her.

And then, in a brief clearing away of some of the clouds that swirled about them Elspeth saw blue sky—and, crossing it, a helipit with its rotor vanes whirling. She raced to the rock to get Mack and bring him out to help her signal—and found him sound asleep.

She tried to waken him, gave it up, then ran back herself into the open, where she jumped and danced and waved and shouted. But the helipit sailed serenely on into the dark clouds—and the lava continued slowly to rise.

"What's all the excitement?" said Mack, suddenly emerging at her shoulder. "Why'd you want to wake a guy up?"

"You fool!" cried the poetess in utter exasperation. "One of our planes just flew over. If you'd been out here he might have seen us—and—and taken us off this horrible place."

"Huh?" said Mack, squinting. Then, as awareness came, "Holy smoke! Your messenger must have got through to your gal-pal."

"And she got through to de Mestres,"

said the girl exultantly, herself beginning to understand what sight of the helipit meant.

"And meanwhile we're still here," Mack said grimly, sending her recently uplifted spirits plummeting. He hesitated, then touched her arm lightly and added, "I'm sorry about the way I talked earlier, Elly. You must have thought I was treating you like just another female who happened to be here. Actually I—well, I . . ." His voice trailed off and his already burned face reddened in embarrassment.

"Mack—*darling!*" cried Elspeth. "You don't have to say it. I'm the wordy one of the two of us."

"You sure are," said Mack and, without further ado, swept her into his arms and sought her lips with his own.

An amused voice brought her out of it—a voice that said almost in her ear, "You two trying to start a volcano of your own?"

Sergeant Carhart was leaning through the door of a helipit, hovering no more than a foot above the little plateau. As they scrambled inside he said to Elspeth, "Lady, I didn't know you could dance. Not till I saw you down there through the smoke."

It was Elspeth's turn to blush.

According to Sergeant Carhart the situation in the city was still a stalemate. "We could cut through them legions like butter but the C.O. don't want us to tip our hand," he said. "He got your message yesterday and sent me and a couple other scouts out last night." He looked back at the inferno now far behind and beneath them, added, "You mean to say you kicked up all that?"

"With an assist from nature," said Mack quietly. "What are you going to do now? Land your ships outside the city and wait for evening?" He nodded toward the two other helipits that had fallen into formation on either side of their own vehicle.

"Looks like we won't have to wait," said the sergeant, glancing ahead. The whole of Italy, from the Appennines to far out over the Tyrrhenian Sea, was

shrouded in an enigmatic bank of cloud. "We'll zero right in to the palace courtyard."

"First time I ever enjoyed a fog while flying," said Mack. He gave Elspeth an odd half-speculative half-embarrassed look that caused her face to feel hot again, then curled up in his seat and went to sleep.

The poetess was still too keyed up to doze off—and there was little time. In a mere matter of minutes they were dropping through the mist over Rome, with jets cut off and rotor vanes whirling softly.

The troops in the palace courtyard had not been idle since Elspeth had last left them. The atmosphere had changed from one of restlessness to one of tense anticipation. Uncovered gun muzzles covered the walls and sentries with automatic arms were posted everywhere.

**I**N HIS office, after expressing relief at their rescue and receiving thanks from Elspeth and Mack, Commander de Mestres said bluntly, "Things are going to pop here any moment now. We checked a half dozen raids on the walls last night. They've got six legions—about twenty thousand men—surrounding us now and I'm afraid a full-scale assault is in the cards."

"What are you going to do?" Mack asked.

"You can't shoot them down!" exclaimed Elspeth. "They haven't a chance against your weapons."

The chunky Commander shook his head and said quietly, "Who said anything about shooting? We've been waiting for word about you two. Now we're going to put on a demonstration before we take off for Silesia. We're just waiting for better visibility."

"But I—" began Elspeth, checked her speech abruptly.

"Unless we bungle it you'll have plenty of opportunity to get your work assembled, Miss Marriner," De Mestres told her. "We don't intend to send all our forces north."

"Thanks, Commander," said Elspeth.

"I do have much to complete of my original assignment."

"You've certainly saved the day for us on ours—you and Mr. Fraser," de Mestres said. "I'm leaving Captain Johnson in nominal charge here—he's coming along nicely now—with Sergeant Carhart in actual command. I think they'll be able to give you any protection you need. Now, what happened to the resident Watcher?"

Elspeth and Mack told de Mestres about the death of Pliny in the eruption. They were still discussing their mission to Misenum when Captain Johnson, wearing a much smaller head bandage than the one Elspeth had contrived for him, entered and said, "The clouds are lifting, sir—and from the look and sound of things outside the walls a general assault is being prepared."

"Okay, Billy—stand by," said the Commander. Pulling a desk microphone close he said, "Now hear this—" and began giving his men detailed orders in a quiet, assured tone.

Johnson came over for a hurried handshake with Elspeth, said somewhat sheepishly, "I understand you brought me back alive, Miss Marriner. Thanks is a poor word under the—"

"It's still Elspeth to you," she told him. "Anyway, Bill, it wouldn't do to let you go to waste—you're much too good-looking."

He blushed and turned to Mack and said, "I hear I owe you my life too. Maybe I can return the favor some day."

"Maybe—but I hope not," Mack snapped. Elspeth was pleased at the thought that he was actually jealous of the handsome young captain.

But there was small time for personal byplay. Things began to happen rapidly as soon as de Mestres pushed back the microphone and rose from his desk. Somehow the poetess found herself in a small observation helipit with Captain Johnson and Sergeant Carhart. Mack had accepted the Commander's invitation to come along as a passenger in his own command vehicle.

"Hurry, Miss," said Sergeant Carhart,

hoisting her into the observation pipit as Captain Johnson already had it off the ground. As she scrambled aboard the poetess saw the plumed helmet of a Roman legionnaire appear in silhouette above the top of the wall, followed instantly by other helmeted heads at a number of other points where scaling ladders had evidently been set.

There came a hoarse shout from the swarming attackers as the entire squadron of alien vessels rose slowly into the sky and spread out, hovering in formation above their astonished ranks. Horses reared at the sight of a strange creature in the air.

**B**EYOND the clustered ranks of the encircling Roman soldiery the population of the Eternal City swarmed in the narrow streets and wide squares, clustered like an endless insect swarm atop every building that might afford them a view of the battle.

Commander de Mestres' voice, strangely amplified and speaking rather halting Latin, said, "Citizens of Rome—we have not come here to do you harm. The weapons at our command are capable of wiping out your great city in a matter of minutes. Regard closely the abandoned grain elevator beyond the Capitoline Hill. . . ."

It was a beautiful maneuver. A gun lashed flame from every one of the flying vehicles as the Commander gave his signal. For a split second that seemed to hang on forever in the poetess' eyes, the indicated structure stood, apparently unharmed.

Then, in a flash of flame and smoke that sent thunderous peals of sound echoing through and above the city, the elevator ceased to exist. As the fumes of the blast rose lingeringly in the air, where the abandoned building had stood was nothing but a blackened cellar pit.

"T.O.T.—perfect T.O.T.," said Sergeant Carhart ecstatically.

"What's T.O.T.?" Elspeth asked him.

"Time on target," said the Sergeant patiently. "It means every shell or charge was set to strike the same target at the

same instant. I never saw it done prettier."

"Look—below," suggested Captain Johnson in his slow Southern drawl. "Our little show seems to have kicked up a hell of a fuss."

The remark was an understatement. Panic was beginning to sweep the streets and housetops alike. The legionnaires were scrambling away from the abandoned Aventine palace as if they feared annihilation by devils—and their fears were communicated to the mob. Horrified, fascinated, the poetess watched a careening two-horse military chariot run over a dozen or more people in a street directly beneath, leaving a wake of figures on the pavement, some struggling, some still.

"Stop it!" she cried involuntarily. "Somebody stop it!"

As if on cue Commander de Mestres' amplified voice sounded again, sternly. In Latin he said, "You will cease your attempts to flee or suffer the consequences. We shall do you no harm unless we are attacked. See that you do not harm yourselves."

They watched the panic slowly subside as, after a half dozen repetitions of his message, Commander de Mestres finally managed to get some sort of authority over the stampeding multitude. Then, when comparative calm was restored, the large body of the squadron suddenly closed ranks and rose high in the air before cutting in jets and heading at full speed toward the Silesian mines and gateway.

A score of vehicles, including that in which the poetess rode, then returned to the Aventine palace courtyard and came to rest within the shelter of its walls. A handful of sentries, who had been left to guard the palace, greeted them curiously, wanting to know how it was going.

"Like silk," said Captain Johnson after assisting Elspeth out of her plane. "We put the fear of God into them all right."

"Where's Mack?" the poetess asked, only to realize that, deliberately or otherwise, her colleague had gone north with the Commander. She said a very naughty

word that caused Sergeant Carhart to jump as if he'd been stung by a bee.

"Something you want, miss?" he inquired.

"Yes, Sergeant," said Elspeth, mustering the vestiges of her self-control to conquer angry frustration. "I'd like the use of one light vehicle and a driver. I still have work to do."

The flat roof that covered the central portion of Princess Berenice's palace was unguarded when the helipit landed, and Elspeth swung easily out onto the flagged surface. "Wait here," she said to the soldier who had been assigned as her chauffeur. She loosened the blaster at her belt for she had no knowledge of how the attack and panic had been accepted by the city.

Princess Berenice emerged alone from a doorway and moved toward the poetess, her face composed but determined, her purple stola swept about her by the breeze, revealing the tininess of her exquisite person. Approaching Elspeth, after a look at the parked helipit and its lounging pilot, she said, "I know not why you have come here, but we greet you in peace and hope for understanding."

The poetess grinned and said the Latin equivalent of, "Come off it, honey—you and I are pals."

The Princess was stopped in her tracks. She peered at her visitor, first at the outlandish coverall, then at her face. A small hand flew to her mouth. Then she gasped, "Marina Elspetia—it is you! I thought you had fled the city with the Admiral."

"It's me and I'm back and we've got a lot to talk about," Elspeth said, putting a friendly arm about her hostess' shoulders. In her new guise she felt little need of standing on former ceremony.

They adjourned to the small chamber off the main ballroom, where previously Elspeth had seen Berenice entertain Titus. There, while wine and fruit were brought, the poetess explained what she could of the parallel worlds, of the Watchers and of her mission. At the conclusion of her account the Princess said, "I'm honored that you have made

me your friend—but why do you tell me this?"

"Because our resident Watcher, the Admiral, died last night in the eruption of Vesuvius," said Elspeth quietly. "I want you to take his place in our service."

"I—a woman?" the Princess countered, overwhelmed. Then, looking oddly at her guest, "But of course—you're a woman too. I—it's just that I've got to get used to the idea." She paused, frowned, added, "Shouldn't such honor go to the Emperor?"

"Definitely not," replied the poetess. "It is Watcher policy of proven worth never to put such power in the hands of an individual who already has that much power on his own planet. We cannot risk its being abused—as it was through an error of judgment on the planet from which comes your rival for the Emperor's affection."

Berenice murmured with a steely look, "And Anna Martiana, whoever she may be, is your enemy as well as mine?"

"Very much so," said Elspeth.

"I am glad," said the Princess. Then, with a sidelong look at her guest, "Do all women in your world dress as you do?"

The poetess laughed. "No, Berenice," she replied. "We have all sorts of costumes—including some I feel certain would meet with more approval from you. Now—what's the current situation on the Anna Martiana front?"

"She is to ride tomorrow in the coronation procession," said the Princess somberly. Then, with a glint in her black eyes, "Unless—"

"Unless what?" asked Elspeth with some impatience, tossing into a discard bowl the pit of the plum she had finished.

"Unless Domitianus keeps an appointment with her. They should be meeting within the hour," Berenice informed her.

"Damnation!" said Elspeth. "If I'd been thinking straight I'd never have recommended such an action. With so much already going on it merely adds a tremendous uncertainty factor."

"I don't understand," said the Princess.

"You will," Elspeth told her. "On most of the other worlds your counterpart got crushed like a millstone between the Emperor and his brother. I'm not going to let that happen to you here."

"What can we do?" Berenice thus put herself entirely in her guest's hands—and Elspeth wished she hadn't.

**B**EFORE she had chance to suggest any action, a slave entered and announced breathlessly that the Emperor was approaching the palace. When he had been dismissed Berenice rose quickly, said, "Marina, you must hide—but I want you close at hand. Quick, get behind those curtains. There's a door in back of them and you'll have an avenue of escape to the roof if you need it."

It was not difficult to read the new Emperor's mood when he came striding into the chamber unaccompanied moments later. His scowl was black, his manner aggressive, his words harsh as he said, "Why, at such a time—with the world threatened by flying devils and on the eve of my own coronation—do you intrigue against me, Berenice?" He flung at her feet the message the Princess had written his brother, added, "Seeking to turn me against my own blood!"

"Nay, sire," said the Princess. "Seeking only to retain your affection—which I have never forfeited."

"Who are you to say that?" countered the furious Caesar. "I have been advised to put you to death. Such is the proper fate of an intriguer against the Emperor!"

"If it will make you happy that I should beg for my life I will do so," replied the Princess proudly, "for your happiness is my sole concern."

Titus' right hand darted to his belt, where gleamed the hilt of a jeweled dagger. Then it fell limply away and he bowed his head and told her, "I cannot lay a hand upon you in anger, Berenice. Would that I could, for it would be far simpler. Now I must seek some other

form of punishment that, in leaving you alive, can bring only unhappiness to both of us."

"And *your* happiness, Highness, is paramount," said a mocking voice from the doorway behind the Emperor. Elspeth felt her breath catch as the Martinez, beautiful, scornful, cold as ice, stepped into the room. She held her right hand in front of her and Elspeth knew without seeing that it contained one of the deadly little hand-blasters of Heartland.

## XI

**T**ITUS spun about at the sound of the Martinez' voice. He thundered, "You were ordered to remain in your quarters. What are you doing here?"

It was, Elspeth thought during an instant of detachment, an odd situation for the new Emperor of so masculine a world as Rome to find himself in. For three women, counting herself, were at that moment deciding his destiny, and that of his world.

Apparently the Heartland leader was as well aware of the nuances as the poetess. Her mocking smile widened as she replied, with a brief mock obeisance, "Seeking only to ensure your happiness, Highness—by removing this source of your future grief."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Titus, his fury rising. Then, lifting his voice to match, "Guards! Come here at once."

"I doubt they'll come," said the Heartlander casually. "I took the precaution of bringing some of my own people."

"Your own people—is my brother with you?" the Emperor asked.

Elspeth admired her nerve. Despite the defeat that faced her she was making a desperate gamble to hold *Antique*—even an *Antique* sealed off forever from her home planet—by control of the Emperor.

She had evidently sought to turn the trap set up for her by Elspeth and Berenice to her own benefit—first by ex-

posing it to the Emperor, then by conspiring with his brother to take over if Titus, as the event had proved, was unable to liquidate Berenice.

"I am with her," was the reply as Domitianus appeared in the doorway and took his stand beside the redhead. "Surely, as a Roman, it is my duty to see that the Empire is not ruled by a Caesar too weak to set aside a traitorous love."

"I am not and have never been traitorous to Rome," the Princess said quietly.

There was an awkward silence. Then, briskly, the Martinez took action. Saying, "Stand aside or share her fate, Titus," she lifted her right hand, pointed it toward Berenice.

At that point Elspeth slipped quietly out from behind the curtains, her blaster leveled in front of her, pointing directly at the Heartland leader. She said, "Take it easy, Ana—your play here is finished."

With an inarticulate cry of fury the redhead pivoted and blazed away with her tiny weapon. A section of the curtain above the poetess' head and slightly to her left disintegrated in flame whose sudden heat seemed to sear her eyebrows. Then her own finger was pressing a firing mechanism and she watched her enemy crumble into ash as the blaster caught her dead center.

The Emperor stared at Elspeth as if at a ghost. He staggered back a step, all but fell over one of the dining couches behind him.

"The Princess Berenice," Elspeth said distinctly, "is under the protection of the visitors of the Aventine palace. Her person is not to be violated by anyone—even Caesar himself. Is it understood?"

Titus nodded in a dazed sort of way, then said, peering at Elspeth, "Ye gods, you're one of them—haven't I met you ere now?"

"In this very room," said the poetess quietly. "It was the night of your return from the Provinces of the North."

"The woman poet!" said the Emperor. "I did not recognize you at first in barbarian garb. What have you done

to Princess Anna?"

"No more than she intended for Princess Berenice," said Elspeth.

"She murdered her!" cried Domitianus, who seemed to have been reduced to a sort of stasis by the horrible sight he had witnessed. "Guards—to me! To me with drawn swords!"

**B**EFORE Elspeth could make another move, Titus' brother had darted through the doorway to safety. From the ballroom beyond came the thud of many feet, heavily shodding, racing toward them. The poetess looked at Berenice, said, "Quickly, we can escape by the roof."

"We'll be trapped like rats," said Titus, seeking a weapon.

"Come!" snapped Elspeth as Berenice reached her side. And to the delight of the poetess a Roman emperor came at her summons. He refused to hurry, however, despite Berenice's entreaties, and Elspeth was forced to plant another burst at the threshold, leaving it a wall of flames and blocking temporarily the entry of Domitianus' armed warriors.

They reached the roof safely and Titus gawked at sight of the helipipit.

The Emperor's brother was just in time to cast a despairing spear at them as the rotor vanes bit the air and lifted them from the flagged surface. The missile passed harmlessly beneath the landing carriage. The pilot grinned at Elspeth and said, "Close, but no cigar."

"We'll fall!" cried Berenice, then bit her lower lip as if ashamed of showing the fear that consumed her. Elspeth consoled her, then turned her attention to the Emperor.

"There," she said, pointing at the panorama beneath them, "is Rome—Rome as no other Emperor or citizen has ever seen her before. Look well on your kingdom, Titus, and try to rule it wisely. You will have help, of course—but your reign will be one of the most difficult in history."

Terror fell away as the fascination of what he saw overcame the new Emperor. He looked long while the pilot, at El-

speth's behest, took them on an aerial tour of the Eternal City. Then she said, "See if you can bring us down safely somewhere on the Imperial palace."

Berenice said through teeth clenched tightly so that they would not chatter, "Marina, what a world you must come from!"

"It has its problems and injustices, like all the worlds," the girl told her. "But at least we have machines instead of slaves and almost all men and women have a chance to be educated. You will be a key figure in transition here—you and the Emperor. It will not be easy. But I promise we shan't expect the impossible."

Elspeth thought suddenly of Mack, risking his life needlessly in the expedition against the Silesian miners. Damn him—and how like a man to do exactly as he had done. She looked at Titus with disfavor.

He seemed to sense her momentary dislike, for he turned to face her and said, "I shall need time to learn my job—but while I may be wrong-headed at times I shall always do my best for Rome." He hesitated, then added, "What of Anna Martiana—what was the witch?"

"Just a witch," said Elspeth quietly. Changing the subject she said, "What will you do with your brother Domitian?"

Titus frowned thoughtfully out at the view. Then he replied, "I have not made up my mind as yet—nor do I intend to today. The boy merits death, if only to discourage other usurpers. Yet I am fond of him and know well the merits he possesses. If I find mercy in my heart—as I believe now that I shall—I'll permit him to prove his loyalty with an assignment on the frontier. After all was I too not bewitched by the lady?"

He looked to the southwest, pointed to a column of smoke rising above the horizon, said, "That looks to be an odd sort of cloud."

"Vesuvius is in eruption, Highness," Elspeth informed him. "I came from there this morning. It was necessary to

set it off to protect your world."

The Emperor looked at her, said sadly, "I do not pretend to understand what is happening. History knows not its like. But I hope none of my poor subjects is being destroyed by the calamity."

"I trust not," said Elspeth. "The lava flow was not too rapid to block escape. But it saved you from a far worse disaster, Highness."

Titus looked at her a moment longer, then dropped his head into his hands and said no more until just before the gear of the helipit came to rest on the Palatine palace roof. Then he said, looking at them blankly, "The coronation procession must be postponed—but not the games lest the people riot."

Elspeth glanced inquiringly at Princess Berenice, who had moved into the seat beside the Emperor and slipped one of her slim arms about his chunky body. There was a look of pride in Caesar's humility in the Oriental girl's expression. She said, "He will be a great Caesar—far greater than the first."

"Yes," said Elspeth, regarding her friend fondly, "we'll see." Well, she thought, the probability sequence is being altered early on this planet. She rejoiced that whatever else happened, her friend Berenice's almost uniformly tragic fate on other more-advanced Earths had a chance of more joyous fulfillment.

SHE sat beside Berenice on a high balcony overlooking the Forum when, a week later, the coronation procession was held.

"You'll stay for the games?" Berenice asked eagerly.

Elspeth shook her head. She, who could not stomach a bullfight, had no intention of exposing her sensibilities to the mass slaughter of men and animals that was so much an element of any Roman celebration. Something, she decided, was going to have to be done about this facet of *Antique* civilization. Perhaps American football. . . .

Doffing stola and gown for the last time, Elspeth got into the slacks, sweater

and jacket in which she had first come to *Antique*. Berenice admired her costume violently, although the idea of trousers disturbed her almost as much as it did Titus. In Rome, it appeared, such garb was considered strictly for crude forest primitives.

"But in time I suppose we shall learn to wear them," said the Princess. Then, with a sigh, "We'll have to do something about our hips, though."

"You will," said Elspeth, laughing. "And Berry, dear, you'll be receiving my successor soon."

"Then I shall never see you again?" the Princess asked.

"Who knows?" countered Elspeth. "I shall try to return, if only to learn how your affairs progress."

"Your word on it?" Berenice pressed. "My word on it," said the poetess. "Now I must go. You'll have to learn a lot of things you never even thought of, but you're going to be a fine resident Watcher, Berry."

"I'll try, Marina."

They embraced and went to the roof, where Elspeth took off in a waiting helipit, this time driving it herself. She proceeded to the Aventine palace, where Sergeant Carhart and Captain Johnson bade her farewell.

Johnson said, "They're leaving some of us here for a while—latest orders from home. You seem to know the ropes around here better than we do, Elly—so how about fixing a fellow with some numbers?"

"As long as you use your time to improve your Latin," said Elspeth, laughing.

"Can you think of a better way to learn a dead language?" the Southerner asked. She gave him an introduction to Berenice which frankly stated its purpose, told him where to take it. Then she asked him what the news was from Silesia.

"None for the last two days," he replied. "The Heartlanders have been making a fight of it. They got some of their own machines through. We've lost some."

"What about Mack Fraser?" she asked, her heart skipping a beat. And, as he looked puzzled, "You know—the man who got us out of there."

"Oh!" said Captain Johnson with a grin. "That one. He got shipped back with the last message ship two days back. Seems he got hurt."

"Oh, no!" she cried. "Where is he?"

"I'm right here," said Mack, strolling into her range of vision. "As to what happened to me I'd rather not say."

Captain Johnson's grin was faintly malicious as he told her, "It seems Fraser here was sent ahead to do some ground scouting on account of he knows the region like a book. When the second group went in they found him hanging upside down in a rabbit trap."

"Mack!" said Elspeth, trying not to laugh. "How'd you get hurt?"

"Oh," said the Southerner, his eyes twinkling, "they didn't hurt him. It seems he busted a collar bone when our fellows cut him down. He's going back with you when you make transfer tonight."

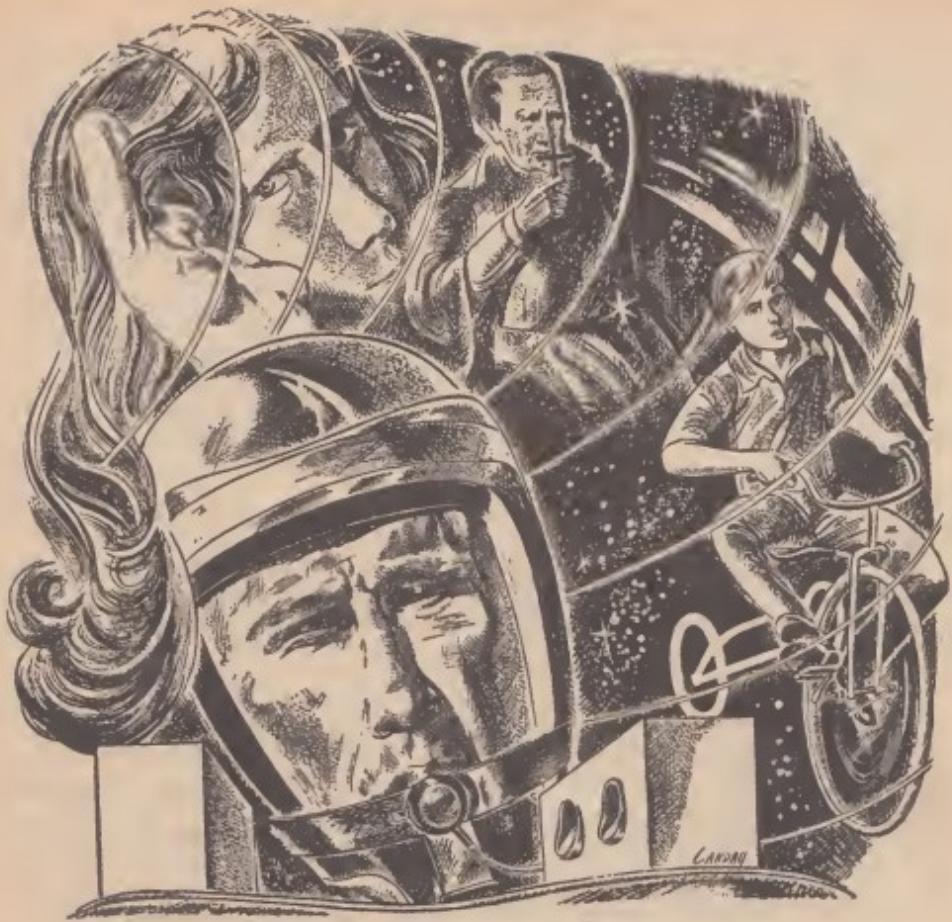
"A fate worse than death," growled Mack, and for the first time Elspeth saw the bulk of a shoulder bandage under his shirt.

"You want to change place with me, Fraser?" said Johnson. "I can assure you I'd jump at the chance."

"Over my dead body," said Mack as Elspeth giggled. But inwardly, for all the badinage, she felt a deep glow of satisfaction. She was going back with Mack, back to Spindrift Key in the Carolinas, the place she loved best in all the world, with the man she loved best in all the world.

Nor was her happiness much dispelled when, later, he said, "I don't want you to be getting ideas just because that fly-boy drooled over you. He's been shut up in that palace so long he's island happy—"

"Oh shut up, Mack," she said gently and kissed him tenderly so as not to hurt his broken collar bone—and for once, during the blackness of transfer, she was not afraid.



# The Runaway Tricycle

By RALPH SLOAN

THROUGH the square windowpanes Dr. Hilliard watched the rocket warm its jets in the center of the runway.

"Anxious, Doctor?" Colonel Lorri chuckled. He arose from a desk littered with quadruples.

All the past came up to greet him in space!

"Apprehensive," the psychiatrist admitted.

The door opened and James Rosnoff stood strangely lost within the room. His body was bulky with straps and truss, though he was hardly larger than a boy, nor older.

"Am I—" the older men

whirled—"am I too early?" Rosnoff's small hands fluttered restlessly against unfamiliar pockets in search of something not fully defined.

"No, no, no!" Colonel Lorri laughed and gripped a hand.

"No. Not too early." Dr. Hilliard pressed a cigarette between those cold fingers and struck a match.

"Still twenty minutes." Rosnoff smiled quickly. He lifted his thin wrist: not looking at the chromium god—looking beyond at the rocket and at the rising moon.

"How do you feel?" The psychiatrist counted the breaths from the taut, drawn mask.

"Nervous, of course." The face wanted to laugh, but couldn't. The white teeth chattered faintly.

"Nervous, of course," the Colonel laughed as though it were a huge joke.

Rosnoff exhaled smoke. "Not quite what I expected."

Dr. Hilliard bent forward. "What did you expect?"

"No, not really expected," Lt. Rosnoff defended in a rush of breath. His bright eyes darted desperately about searching escape. "Daydreams," he admitted. "A Sousa march—"

"Yes?" Insistent.

"Bandstands draped in bunting . . . floodlights . . . hawkers—" He broke off and flushed.

"Yes?" Brutally.

"That's right," Rosnoff told his cigarette, "you have to know everything, don't you?"

Very gently, "Everything."

Colonel Lorri's throat rumbled. "By God, have some decency," he declared bitterly. "He's spent months on your damn couch and you crammed him into the mockup until he's more a part of the machine than the jets are. Leave his mind alone for these last few minutes."

Dr. Hilliard pivoted softly; his bones were white milk in the ruby glass of his face.

"There!" His blue eyes were fingers of fire pointing at the rocket. "There is science. Electronics and physics and

chemistry and thermodynamics; your metallurgy and astronomy. . . . The years scattered from his shaking frame like vultures taken aghast. Then he faltered, groping. "There is science out there. What we have here is *man*—something greater—something infinitely less measurable."

Lt. Rosnoff crushed his cigarette beneath a soft leather boot.

"I don't mind," he said. He faced the psychiatrist squarely. "I thought there might be girls to kiss. A daydream. Nothing but poetic fantasy."

A head appeared in the doorway. "Ten minutes, Colonel."

The three men looked expectantly at each other. The months of being a unit of one dropped a curtain of silence about them.

"Wish me luck." With a quick boyish smile, Rosnoff thrust out his hand. The military man and the psychiatrist each gripped it. Then the young Lieutenant turned swiftly and left.

*Like a young soldier into his first battle*, thought the Colonel.

*Like a child walking alone to school that first frightening day*, thought Dr. Hilliard.

The two older men hesitated, then followed slowly.

"How old," the Colonel asked as though wanting to be reminded.

"Twenty-two."

"My God," he whispered, "Twenty-two."

A forgotten toolbox was thrown from the hatch midway up the rocket.

"There's the Sousa march," the Colonel said as the tools clanked across the asphalt.

Rosnoff was climbing the ladder now. . . .

"And there's the gallery," the Colonel said. "Those are the witnesses." A tight fistful of men huddled in the lee of a hangar. "We broke security thirty minutes ago."

Uniforms were sprinkled like wind-blown seed; mechanics knelt silent. Like a bit of chaff was the dinner napkin still firmly clutched by a distinguished senator.

**R**OSNOFF was gone within the rock-  
et. Like a firecracker high in the  
wind; the closing of the hatch. Silence!  
Ticking unbearable silence.

*Rolling, Searing Thunder . . .*

*The rocket a hurtling match . . .*

*A dying serpent tongue in the  
night. . . .*

The wind blew autumn leaves across  
the empty runway.

"So much work," the Colonel whis-  
pered.

"Gone," the psychiatrist sighed.

The starwashed heavens echoed back  
the silent inquiry with voluminous  
vacancy.

"They'll be picking him up at Palomar," Dr. Hilliard reminded.

"By God, I forgot my speech," the  
distinguished senator cried. He hurried  
away, a terrier in the dark.

"So many years of planning," the  
Colonel whispered. His eyes were wet.  
"You understand, Doctor. It's like los-  
ing a child."

"Yes." The psychiatrist looked down  
at the tarmac. His neck was sore from  
staring at emptiness. "Now the Ros-  
noffs: mother and father," he began..

The Colonel's spine snapped erect.

"They're on twenty-four hour call,"  
he confirmed stiffly. "This is all non-  
sense, Doctor. Rosnoff won't be back  
for a week."

"Of course not. But have a car and  
driver held ready," the psychiatrist ins-  
isted. He led the way back to the official  
sanctum. "I wish we could have steady  
contact. But at least we'll get a signal  
at saturation point."

"Wait!" The Colonel spun the psy-  
chiatrist around, towering in fullblown  
rage. For a moment they faced each  
other in the moonlight; two men of a  
height and an age: the psychiatrist  
florid and Nordic—the Colonel stiff and  
gray like the iron that fed the steel of  
Rosnoff's rocket.

"Why?" the Colonel demanded.  
"You've fought Rosnoff all the way.  
Why? He was top man at the Point.  
His weight is right; his experience per-  
fect. He's trustworthy and loyal. Why,

he was even born on the Fourth of July!  
Why doubt him?"

"Because—" very soberly—"we're all  
of us children in space. . . ."

**N**OTHING was quite the way Ros-  
noff had expected. There was no  
nausea, only the frantic sense of hellish  
speed and his flesh vibrating and rolling  
like warm tar, and the heavens splitting  
wide and brilliant, and the winking eyes  
dying and staring glassy and bright.

He lay prone in his narrow padded  
coffin and stared out through the glassite  
nose at the glories of creation, gratefully  
aware that cameras had begun their filming  
automatically and tape recorders to spin  
what words he chose. Blood pres-  
sure, respiration and pulse were travel-  
ing the wavy lines of graphs. For three  
fantastic days he would be free to feel  
and taste the universe: the first celestial  
gourmet.

"0915," he said carefully. "There is  
no sight to equal this. Not even a com-  
parison. Several thousand stars can be  
seen from earth. I must be looking at a  
million right now. I can't describe it. I  
hope the films do it justice." He wet his  
lips. "Most of the stars have stopped  
oscillating, but some around the fringe  
of the moon are still winking."

And there was color—the stars were a  
fabulous rainbow of colors. A celestial  
Christmas tree with no atmosphere to  
bleach them a sterile white.

It was hard to think. It was hard to  
breathe.

There was so much of it—

Very slowly he became aware of the  
mists closing in around him. He didn't  
think of it at first.

I wonder if heaven is really up, he  
asked himself. He remembered his pa-  
ternal grandfather kneeling on a prayer  
rug and bowing toward Mecca. Yes,  
and there had been the heavy, reddish  
face of his Irish maternal grandmother  
kissing her crucifix and blessing the  
Virgin. And then with a smile he re-  
membered them each calling the other  
'heathen' with wild gestures—shouting  
and profaning in three languages.

Then he wasn't remembering any longer. . . .

Grandmother O'Hannigan was in front of the rocket.

"Look out," he screamed.

The rocket struck her and she dissolved about him and streamed into pieces of nothing.

Sweat covered Rosnoff's face. His heart thudded against his chest; breath coming in strange gulps that required conscious effort.

"Dear Lord," he whispered. There was nothing ahead of him now but the stars and the moon and thin ropey wisps of dust. Serpentine flying past his face. Confetti and Mardigras phantoms.

Then the dust formed a sane pattern and flowed evenly about him. It was a river at flood, storming horribly silent.

"I'm glad the cameras are getting this," he told the tape recorder. Yes, that was fine, but it wasn't enough. He must make sound in his throat and force stiff lips to form words and feed human reaction into the sterile records. He must make lyrics to match the symphony of pulse and respiration and blood pressure.

"A river," he blurted. "This is what a salmon must see leaping the rapids. Is that what I'm doing? Is that what man is doing? Are we going into space to spawn and die?"

There was no answer. Only the tendrils of dust flashing past the glassite nose of the rocket.

Lt. Rosnoff depressed a stud with his left hand. Caffeine concentrate popped into a small hollow near his chin. He reached the two brown pills with his tongue and swallowed. For obvious reasons there would be no solid food during his odyssey; no more liquid than his body could absorb.

Time passed. By the lighted chronometer beneath his nose, it was incredible that so little of it had passed. The sweat had spread from his face. It covered his whole body in a clammy unclean feeling that chilled him at each terrified movement.

The dust grew thicker. He described

it as: "A muddy river . . . a violent river . . . a volcanic flow."

"I can't see the moon anymore," he cried. "There's nothing but vague shapes and glows ahead. Like a—" he fumbled—"like clouds on a rainy day."

He was alone. There was no floor to heaven—no foothold to sanity.

Then suddenly there was again substance to the dust. Great faces formed and matched the speed of the rocket and floated ahead of him. Tremendous eyes glared and huge lips flapped mute words.

"Imagination," he whispered to the recorder. "It *must* be imagination."

Then with a cry of terror, James Rosnoff saw his father. An eye—a lip—a shimmering mask of death. . . .

. . . And the dust was his mother's hair dropping down on him, suffocating him. . . .

His whole body contorted with dread.

Then he was flashing down a street. A hill. A horribly familiar precipice. He was a baby. A child. A man falling; an infant crying.

Telephone poles darted by. A wet brick street in the rain. Children screaming. A tricycle bumping and rushing. Tight little fists clutching the reeling handlebars.

*He couldn't turn. . . .*

*He couldn't turn. . . .*

*Down the hill! . . . down . . . down . . . DOWN. . . .*

PALOMAR phoned an hour ago," Dr. Hilliard said. "We'd already gotten the saturation signal. Blood pressure and pulse must have been tremendous."

Colonel Lorri had just entered the office. He made angry efforts to tuck in his shirttail. His eyes were still bleary from sleep.

"Two days," he rumbled furiously. "By God I'll have him courtmartialed."

"I ordered a car for the Rosnoff parents," Dr. Hilliard went on. He gave no indication of having heard the outburst.

"When will he land?"

"About fifteen minutes." He bit his lip. "I hope there was enough time in

mockup. He'll be coming in by instinct."

"By cowardice, you mean." Colonel Lorri grabbed the phone. "Hello. Give me the tower. . . . Tower? I want the operations officer . . . Is it important? . . . Who is this," he raged. . . . "Well, by God Captain, you'll be a Lieutenant in the morning! A plane could have crashed while you mumbled about was it important—" his fury was a wounded lion, "No, I don't give a damn if this is an inoperative field. . . ." He put his hand over the speaker.

"Is everybody crazy?" he told Dr. Hilliard. The psychiatrist shrugged. The Colonel gnawed his lip peevishly. "Yes, hello," he barked at the instrument. "The MX-1 is coming back—you imbecile," he roared, "I know it's not due. Stand by for a possible crash. Get fire equipment ready—no, how the hell should I know what kind of fire atomics will cause!"

He slammed down the phone and rushed to the window. He looked up at the stars. There was nothing yet.

A siren echoed out of the night and a military limousine squealed brakes in front of the office.

"Get that man's name," the Colonel shouted. "Crazy reckless driving."

"It's the Rosnoffs," the psychiatrist soothed.

"I don't care who it is," the military man cried. The whole world was topsy. Where was the rhyme—the reason—the order and sensibility to the fine military life. He followed the psychiatrist out under the roof of midnight stars.

Mrs. Rosnoff was small and dark like her son and her eyes held a mother's natural fright. "What is happening?" she begged.

"Please, is there something wrong?" Mr. Rosnoff asked. His eyes said, "Tell me for I am a man, but please, please don't hurt her."

"Your son is coming back," the psychiatrist said. "We want you here when he lands. There is no trouble," he lied.

The Colonel's laugh was a vulgar curse in the night.

"A mechanical failure?" Mr. Ros-

noff inquired incredulously.

"Yes," Dr. Hilliard admitted. "Some type of mechanics."

"There it is," someone cried.

The rocket was the hiss of a serpent high in the limbo of forgotten nights; a black arrow eclipsing stars—flaring jets.

Down, down it came! So quick. Down the radio beam. Rushing; sliding.

Mrs. Rosnoff screamed.

The rocket grew; jerking—wallowing out of the heavens.

It was falling straight at them. . . .

"Halt!" the Colonel roared.

Heads went down and arms came up in that pitiful attempt at defense.

Then the rocket coughed and breathed on them and flowed on. Beyond. A hundred yards. Then, the nose swept up and its jets boiled lakes of asphalt lava. It hung like a leaping swordfish. Flashing fire and moonlight. Then it died. . . .

There was the strange crackle of heat in the night. Mr. Rosnoff was saying, "There, mamma, there," when there was nothing to say. His wife was crying softly.

At the south end of the field headlights whirled onto the runway. Sirens and bells lifted in the wind.

Some inner discipline moved the Colonel forward.

"Come," he commanded. The iron in him was brittle and old.

"Must we go," Mr. Rosnoff implored. His eyes begged consideration for his frightened wife.

"Yes," Dr. Hilliard said. "You may be needed."

**T**HEY strode across the runway with the cold autumn wind in their faces. Somewhere an orchardman would smudge against the frost. Somewhere a child would watch the steam of his breath and wonder at the magic.

The rocket lay on its side like a gutted fish. The small electrical fires had been extinguished. Geiger counters whispered that the atomics were safe and asbestos wrapped men were crawling over the steel body, trying to reach the pilot.

*And then they had him. . . .*

The Rosnoffs stared up with tears in their eyes.

"Get an ambulance," the Colonel shouted. "Get Security officers and M.P.s."

Lt. Rosnoff's face was bleeding. He was crying and pulling at the arms that carried him.

"Mommie," he cried.

"Here, I'm here, son," Mrs. Rosnoff called.

"Mommie," Lt. Rosnoff blubbered. He fought away from his rescuers.

"Stop him," Colonel Lorri shouted.

"No," Dr. Hilliard commanded.

They met, mother and son, with flaying and clutching arms. Then young Rosnoff fell to his knees; holding the skirts; weeping with terror.

"It wouldn't stop," he wept, "it wouldn't stop."

"A craven coward," Colonel Lorri breathed. "Get up. Get up and report, you miserable coward."

"Leave him alone," Dr. Hilliard said firmly. "Leave him on his knees. That's the way parents should look to him now. Can't you see he's a child again?"

*"A child?"* The Colonel stared; frozen in the rigors of the macabre.

"Yes, yes," Dr. Hilliard rushed on. "Stay away from him," he ordered the

Security men and the M.P.s who had joined the circle. "Take him home, Mrs. Rosnoff. Put him to bed. Find books and toys that were his when he was three or four."

They lifted Lt. Rosnoff onto a stretcher because he wouldn't leave the perspective of his knees.

Colonel Lorri stared after them.

"Is that the price?" he breathed harshly. "Is madness the price?"

"No," Dr. Hilliard shook his head. "In a few days, a few weeks perhaps, he'll be well again." The excitement and fury had melted away. "We have the pictures and the tapes. There was too much unknown out there. Now we'll know a fraction more...."

The crash wagons and the crews had faded into the wings of night.

They walked alone across the runway; two cigarettes blowing smoke in the autumn wind.

"You understand, Doctor," the military man explained desperately. "It was like sending out my child and having him come back lame."

There was no need for apology.

"He took the first hard steps." The psychiatrist looked up at the stars. "Perhaps tomorrow he'll go all the way around the block."



*Coming in the Next Issue*

## THE WHITE WIDOWS

*A Novel of Woman's Revolt* by SAM MERWIN, JR.

and

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*A Brilliant Novelet* by ED M. CLINTON, JR.



*Prue had a fatal fascination for*

*important men—and she had no idea*

*how important—or how fatal. . . .*

# THE WAGES of SYNERGY



## I

**I**T WAS the way they were breathing, she thought in despair and disgust, that was making her mind run on like this. The breathing was open throated in the darkness, consciously quiet though its intensity was almost beyond control. It was quiet because of the thin walls in this awful place, quiet to hide what should have been open and joyful. And as the blind compulsion for openness and joy rose, so rose the necessity for more control, more quiet. And then it was impossible to let her mind rest and ride, to bring in that rare ecstatic sunburst. The walls were growing thinner and thinner, surely—and outside people clustered, listening. More and more people, her mind told her madly. People with more and more ears, until she and Karl were trying to be quiet and secret in the center of a hollow sphere of great attentive ears, a mosaic of lobes and folds and inky orifices, all set together like fish scales. . . .

Then the catch in his breath, the feeling of welcome, of gratitude . . . the wrong gratitude, the wrong relief, for it was based only on the fact

a novelet by THEODORE STURGEON

that now it was over—but oh, be quiet. The heaviness now, the stillness . . . quiet. Real quiet, this now, and no pretense. She waited.

Anger flicked at her. Enough is enough. This weight, this stillness . . .

Too much weight. Too much stillness . . .

"Karl." She moved.

"Karl!" She struggled, but quietly.

Then she knew why he was so quiet and so still. She looked numbly at the simple fact, and for a long moment she breathed no more than he did, and that was not at all, for he was dead. And then the horror. And then the humiliation.

Her impulse to scream died as abruptly as he had died, but the sheer muscular spasm of it flung her away from him and out into the room. She stood covering away from the cold, the rhythmic flare of an illuminated sign somewhere outside, and again she opened her throat so her gulping breath would be silent.

She had to escape, and every living cell in her cried for shrieking flight. But no; somehow she had to get dressed. Somehow she had to let herself out, travel through corridors where the slightest glimpse of her would cause an alarm. There were lights, and a great glaring acreage of lobby to be crossed. . . .

And somehow she did all these things, and got away into the blessed, noisy, uncaring city streets.

KILLILEA sat at yet another bar, holding still another gin and water, wondering if this were going to be another of those nights.

Probably. When you're looking for someone, and you won't go to the police, and you know it's no use to advertise in the papers because she never reads the papers, and you don't know anyone who might know where she is, but you do know that if she is upset enough, unhappy enough, she drinks in bars—why then, you go to bars. You go to good ones and dirty ones, empty and bright and dusty and dark ones, night after night, never knowing if she's going to pieces in the one you went to last night,

or if she'll be here tomorrow when you are somewhere else.

Someone sneezed explosively, and Killilea, whose nerves had always been good and who was, besides, about as detached from his immediate surroundings as a man can get, astonished himself by leaping off the bar stool. His drink went *pleup* and shot a little tongue of gin upwards, to lick the side of his neck coldly. He swore and wiped it with the back of his hand, and turned to look at the source of that monstrous human explosion.

He saw a tall young man with bright red ears and what had doubtless been a display handkerchief, with which he was scrubbing at the camel's hair sleeve of a girl in the booth opposite. Killilea's nostrils distended in mild disgust, while his lips spread in amusement just as mild. Sort of thing that might happen to anybody, he thought, but my God, that fellow must feel like a goon. And look at the guy in the booth with the girl. Doesn't know what to say. So what do you say? Don't spit on my chick? Too late. I'm going to punch you in the mouth? That wouldn't help. But if he doesn't do something he can't expect his lady-friend to be happy about it.

Killilea ordered another drink and glanced back to the booth. The tall young man was backing off in a veritable cloud of apologies; the girl was dabbing at her sleeve with a paper napkin, and her friend still sat speechless. He pulled his own handkerchief out, then put it back. He leaned forward to speak, said nothing, straightened up again, miserably.

"Fine Sir Galahad you turned out to be," said the girl.

"I don't think Galahad was ever faced with just this situation," her escort replied reasonably. "I'm sorry . . . ."

"You're sorry," said the girl. "That helps a lot, don't it?"

"I'm sorry," the man said again. Then slightly annoyed, "What did you expect me to do? Sneeze right back at him?"

She curled her lip. "That would've been better than just doing nothing."

Nothing, that's you—*nothing*."

"Look," he said, half rising.

"Going some place?" she asked nastily. "Go on then. I can get along. Beat it."

"I'll take you home," he said.

"Not me you won't."

"Okay," he said. He got out of the booth and looked at her, licking his lips unhappily. "Okay, then," he said. He dropped a dollar bill on the table and walked toward the door. She looked after him, her lower lip protruding wet and sulky. "Thanks for the neighbor-

She looked at his face, his clothes.

"Sit down," she said.

"Waiter!" he said, and sat down.

NOW Killilea looked into his drink and smiled. Smiles didn't come easily these days and he welcomed them. He thought about the couple behind him. Suppose they had a great romance now. Suppose they got married and lived for years and years until they were old, and held hands on their golden wedding anniversary, and thought back to this night, this meeting: "First time you saw me, you spit on me . . ." First time

## *Not Made of Cardboard*

**TED STURGEON**, having been absent too long from these pages, returns with a story which augurs well for the future. THE WAGES OF SYNERGY is something of a whodunit. It is not even a particularly new idea, but it is beautiful to observe what a gifted writer can do with a familiar theme.

It brings us back to our recent discussion of maturity in science fiction. THE WAGES OF SYNERGY is a prize example of how a story can be done on more than one level, simply by creating real human beings instead of cardboard characters who are manipulated willy-nilly by their author. We'll be interested in your reactions to this story.

—THE EDITOR

hood movie," she yelled at him, in a voice that carried all over the room. His shoulders gave a tight, embarrassed shrug. He grasped his lapels and gave his jacket a pathetic, angry little tug downward and left without looking back.

Killilea swung back to the bar and found he could see the booth in the mirror. "Big deal," said the girl, speaking into her open compact as if it were a telephone.

The tall young man who had sneezed approached cautiously. "Miss—"

She looked up at him calculatingly.

"Miss, I couldn't help hearing, and it was really my fault."

"No it wasn't," she said. "Forget it! He didn't mean nothing to me anyway."

"You're real nice about it anyway," said the young man. "I wish I could do something."

he saw Prue, she'd barged in on him in a men's room. Crazy, crazy, the way things happen.

"The way things happen," said a voice. "Crazy."

"What?" Killilea demanded, startled. He turned to look at the man next to him. He was a small man with pugnacious eyebrows and mild eyes, which became troubled and shy at Killilea's barking tone. He thumbed over his shoulder and said placatingly, "Them."

"Yeah," said Killilea. "I was just thinking the same thing."

The mild eyes looked comforted. The man said. "Crazy."

The door opened. Someone came in. It wasn't Prue. Killilea turned back to the bar.

"Waitin' for somebody," said his neighbor.

"Yes," said Killilea.

"I'll beat it if your company gets here," said the man with the mild eyes. He breathed deeply, as if about to perform something brave. "Okay if I talk to you in the meantime?"

"Oh hell yes," said Killilea.

"Man needs somebody to talk to," said his neighbor. There was a taut silence as they both strove to find something to talk about, now that the amenities had been satisfied. Suddenly the man said, "Hartog."

"What?" said Killilea. "Oh. Killilea." They shook hands gravely. Killilea grunted, looked down at his hand. It was bleeding from a small cut in the palm. "Now how the hell did I do that?"

"Let me see," said the man called Hartog. "Oh, I say . . . I don't know what to . . . I think it was my fault." He showed his right hand, on the middle finger of which was a huge, gaudily designed ring with the gold plate wearing off the corners of the mounting. The stone was gone, and one of the mounting claws pointed up, sharp and gleaming. "I lost the stone yesterday," said Hartog. "I shouldn't have worn it. Turned it around inside my hand like always when I come in a place like this. But what can I do?" He looked as if he were about to cry. He worried at the ring until he could get it off, and dropped it into his pocket. "I just don't know what to say!"

"Hey, you didn't cut my arm off, you know," Killilea said good-naturedly. "Don't say anything. Not to me." Killilea pointed at the bartender. "Tell him what you're drinking."

They sipped companionably while the couple behind them laughed and murmured, while the jukebox unwound identical sentiments in assorted keys. "I fix refrigerators," said Hartog.

"Chemist," said Killilea.

"You don't say. Mix prescriptions, and all?"

"That's a pharmacist," said Killilea. He was going to say more, but decided against it. He was going to say that he was a biological chemist specializing in

partial synthesis, and that he'd developed one he wished he could forget about, and that it had been so fascinating that Prue had left him, and that that had made him leave chemistry to look for her. But it would have been tiring to go through it all, and he was not used to unburdening himself to people. Even so, as Hartog had said, a man needs someone to talk to. I need Prue to talk to, he thought. I need Prue, oh God, but I do. He said, abruptly, "You're English."

"I was once," said Hartog. "How'd you know?"

"They call a drug store a chemist shop."

"I forgot," said Hartog; and this time, strangely, he seemed to be talking to himself, chidingly. Without understanding, Killilea said, "That's all right."

Hartog said, "I wonder if I spit on some girl she'll pick me up."

"It takes all kinds," said Killilea.

"All kinds," said Hartog, and nodded sagely. "All want the same thing. Each one wants to get it a different way. Hell of a thing to know what one wants, not know how she wants it."

"Keep it interesting," said Killilea.

**HARTOG** fumbled a cigarette out of a pack without removing the pack from his pocket. "One been hanging out at Roby's, where I just was. You just know it about her, way she looks at everyone, way she watches." Killilea gave him matches. Hartog used one, blew it out with smoke from his nostrils, and stared for a long time at the charred end. "Funny little thing. Skinny. Everything wrong—bony here, flat there, and she got a big nose. Looks hungry. When you look at her you feel hungry too." He looked at Killilea swiftly, as if Killilea might be laughing at him. Killilea was not. "You feel hungry, not for food, see what I mean?"

Killilea nodded.

Hartog said, "I couldn't make it with her. Everything fine until you make this much—" he held a thumb and forefinger perhaps a sixteenth of an inch apart—"of a pass. Then she scares."

"A come-on."

"Nup," said Hartog. He closed his eyes to look at something behind them, and shook his head positively. "I mean scared—*real* scared. Show her a snake, shoot off a gun, she wouldn't scare like that." He shrugged. He picked up his glass, saw it was empty, and put it down again. Killilea was aware that it was Hartog's turn to buy. Then he noticed how carefully Hartog was keeping his eyes off Killilea's glass, which was also empty, and he remembered the way the single cigarette had come out. He beckoned the bartender, and Hartog thanked him. "Get up a parade," said Hartog. "Guys with ways to get a woman. Send 'em in one at a time to this funny little thing I'm telling you about. One brings sweet talk. One brings beads 'n' bracelets. One brings troubles to get sympathy. One brings sympathy for her troubles. One brings a fishtail Cadillac an' a four-carat blinder. One brings a hairy chest. All they going to do, all the specialists, they going to scare her, they won't get next to her *a-tall*."

"She doesn't want it then."

"You wouldn't say that, you see her," said Hartog, shaking his head. "Must be some way, some one way. I got a theory, there's a way to get to anything, you can only think of it."

Killilea swirled his drink. Bars are full of philosophers. But just now he wasn't collecting philosophers. "You selling something?" he asked nastily.

"I'm in the refrigerator repair business," said Hartog, apparently unaware of the insult. His ash dropped on his coat, whereupon he tapped his cigarette uselessly on the rim of an ashtray. "And why I keep talking about her, I don't know. Skinny, like I said. Her nose is big."

"All right, you're not selling," said Killilea contritely.

"Got only one ear lobe," said Hartog. "Saw when she pushed her hair back to scratch her neck. What's the matter, Mr. Killdeer?"

"Killilea," said Killilea hoarsely. "Which ear?"

Hartog closed his eyes. "Right one."

"The right one has a lobe, or the right one hasn't?"

"Taken in parts," said Hartog, "that's a real homely woman. Taken altogether, I don't know why she makes a man feel like that, but damn if she—"

Should I explain to this disyllabic solon, thought Killilea, that the day I met Prue in the men's room she charged out and went face-first through the frosted-glass door and lost an earlobe? And that therefore I would like very much to know if this . . . what had the idiot said? He'd just come from . . . Roark's . . . ? Rory's? *Roby's!*

Killilea turned and bucketed out.

The bartender blinked as the door crashed open, and then his cold professional gaze swung to Hartog. He advanced. Hartog sipped, licked his lips, sipped again, and put the empty glass down. He met the bartender's eye.

"Your friend forgot something?"

Hartog pulled a roll of bills from a jacket pocket, separated a twenty, and dropped it on the bar. "Not a thing. Take it out of this. Build me another. Have one yourself and keep the change." He leaned forward suddenly, and for the first time spoke in a broad Oxford accent. "You know, old chap, I'm extraordinarily pleased with myself."

## II

**S**HE didn't see him when he came into Roby's, which wasn't surprising. He remembered how she used to lean close to see his expression when they held hands. The only reason she had been in the men's room the day they met—what was it, four years ago? Five?—was that LADIES is a longer word than MEN, but the sign on this particular one said GENTLEMEN, and since it seemed to have more letters, she headed for it. She had glasses, good ones, but she wouldn't wear them, not without drawing the blinds first.

He moved to a table fifteen feet from hers and sat down. She was facing him almost directly, wearing the old, im-

penetrable, inturning expression he used to call her fogbound look. He had seen that face that way in happiness and in fright, in calm rumination and in moments of confusion; it was an expression to be read only in context. So he looked at the hands he knew so well, and saw that the left was flat on the table and the right palm upon it, pressing it from wrist to knuckles, over and over in a forceful sliding motion that would leave the back of the right hand hot and red and tender.

That's all I need to know, he said to himself, and rose and went to her. He put his big hand gently down on hers and said "It's going to be all right, Prue."

He pulled a chair close to her and silently patted her shoulder while she cried. When a waiter came near he waved the man away. In due time, he said, "Come home, Prue."

Her strange face whipped up, close to his. It was flogged, flayed, scored with the cicatrices of sheer terror. He had her hands and gripped them tightly as she started to rise. She sank down limply, and again she had the fogbound face. "Oh no, Killy; no. Never.. Hear me, Killy? Never."

There was only one thing to say—"why?"—and since he knew that if he said nothing, she must answer the question, he was quiet, waiting.

Prue, Prue . . . in his mind he paraphrased the odd fantasy of Hartog, the barfly he had met this evening: Get up a parade. Ask the specialists, one by one, what do you think of a girl like Prue? (Correction: what do you think of Prue? There were no girls *like* Prue.) Send in a permanent secretary of the Ladies Auxiliary: *Sniff!* Send in a social worker: *Tsk!* A Broadwayite: *Mmm . . .* A roué: *Ah . . .!* The definition for Prue, like beauty, could be found only in the eye of the beholder. Killilea had one, a good one. For Killilea—perhaps because he was a steroid chemist and familiar with complex and subtle matters—saw things from altitudes and in directions which were not usual. Prue lived in ways which, in aggregate, are called sophisti-

cation; but Killilea had learned that the only true sophistication lies in exemplary and orthodox behavior. It takes a wise, careful and deeply schooled gait to pace out the complicated and shifting patterns of civilized behavior. It takes a nimble and fleet hypocrisy to step from conflict to paradox among the rules of decency. A moral code is an obstinate anagram indeed. So Prue, thought Killilea, is an innocent.

And never to be with him again? Never? *Why?*

"It would kill you," she explained finally.

He laughed suddenly. "We understand each other better than that, Prue. What awful thing has happened to me, then? Or what wonderful thing has happened to you?"

Then she told him about Karl. She told him all about it. "The men's floor of that silly hotel," she finished. "It seemed a sort of—different thing to do. We conspired . . . and it was funny."

"Getting out of there wasn't funny," he conjectured.

"No," she said.

"Poor Prue. I read about it in the papers."

"What? The papers?"

"About Karl's death, Miss Misty. Not about you! . . . He was quite an important man, you know."

"Was he?"

KILLILEA had long since ceased to be amazed at Prue's utter inability to be impressed by the things that impress everyone else. "He was a sort of columnist. More like an essayist. Most people read him for his political commentaries. Some people thought he was a poet. He shouldn't have died. We need people like him."

"He liked *The Little Prince* and mango chutney and he would rather look at penguins than baby rabbits," said Prue, stating her qualifications. "I killed him, don't you understand?"

"Prue, that's ridiculous. They had an autopsy and everything. It was heart failure."

She put her left hand flat on the table and with the right pressed and slid cruelly. "Prue," he said. She stopped.

"I did, Killy. I know I did."

"How do you know you did?"

That terror flitted across her face again.

"You can tell me, Prue."

"Because." She looked up into his face, leaning forward in that swift, endearing, myopic way. She so seldom really wanted to look at anything, he thought. The things she knows . . . the way she thinks . . . she doesn't *need* to see. "Killy, I couldn't bear it if you died. And you'd die."

He snorted. Gently, then, he asked her, "That isn't why you went away, is it?"

"No," she said without hesitation. "But it's why I stayed away."

He paused to digest that. "Why did you go away?"

"You weren't you any more."

"Who was I?"

"Someone who didn't look at the snow before it had footprints, someone who read very important papers all the way through the crêpes Suzettes, someone who didn't feed the goldfish," she said thoughtfully, and added, "Someone who didn't need me."

"Prue," he began, and cast about for words. He wished devoutly that he could talk to her in terms of ketoprogesterone and the eleventh oxygen in a four-ring synthesis. "Prue, I stumbled on something terribly important. Something that . . . you know those old horror stories, all built on the thesis that there are certain mysteries that man should not know? I always sneered at them. I don't any more. I was interested, and then fascinated, and then I was frightened, Prue."

"I know, Killy," she said. There was deep understanding in her voice. She seemed to be trying as hard as he was to find words. "It was important." The way she used the term included "serious" and "works of the world" and even "pompous."

"Don't you see, Killy," she said earnestly, "that you can have something

important, or you can have me? But you can't have both."

THERE was a gallant protest to be made at this point, and he knew better than to make it. If he told her how very important she was, she would look at him in astonishment—not because she could not realize her importance to him, but because he would have so badly misused the term. He understood her completely. There was room in his life for Prue and his work when he built on his steroid nuclei as Bach built on a theme, surely and with joy. But when the work became "important," it excluded Prue and crêpes Suzettes and a lovingly bitten toe: music straight from a sunset rather than a sunset taken through music: the special sting across the sight from tears of happiness: and all the other brittle riches that give way when that which is "important" grows greater to a man than that which is vital. And she was perfectly right in saying that he had not needed her then.

"I've dropped it now," he said humbly. "All of it. No more fractionations. No more retained benzoquinones. No more laboratories, no more chemistry. Sometimes," he continued in her strange idiom, "there's a door to a flight of steps down to a long passageway, and it's magic every way you look. And on you go, down and around and along, until you find where it all leads, and that's a place as bad as a place can get. It's so bad you never want to go there again. It's so bad you never want the corridor again, or the steps. It's so bad you'll never go through the door. You close it and you lock it and you never even go near the door again."

"You wouldn't leave chemistry for me," she said factually.

"No, I wouldn't. I didn't. Prue, I'm trying to tell you that I closed the door eighteen months ago. Not for you. For me."

"Oh, Killy!" She was deeply concerned. "Not you! But whatever have you been doing instead?"

"Looking for you."

"Oh dear," she whispered.

"It's all right. All those fellowships; the prizes—I don't need chemistry any more. I don't even have to work. Prue, come with me. Come home."

She closed her eyes, and her cheek bones seemed to rise toward them, so tightly were they sealed. She shook her head very slowly, twice, and at last a tear pressed through the lids. "I can't, Killy. Don't ask me, don't ever," she choked.

The inconceivable thought struck him, and the fact that it was inconceivable was the most eloquent thing which could be said about Prue and Killilea. "Don't you *want* to?" he asked painfully.

"Want to? You don't know, you can't. Oh, I want *so* much to." She made a swift, vague gesture which silenced him. "I can't, Killy. You'd die."

He thought about Karl and the dreadful thing that had happened to her. To call that experience traumatic would be fabulous understatement. But what peculiar twist made her insist that *he* might be harmed?

"Why are you so sure?" When he saw her face, he said, "You've got to tell me, Prue. I'll ask and ask until you do."

SHE leaned close to see his eyes. She looked into one, and the other. She touched his hair, a touch like the stirring of a warm wind. "Karl wasn't the first one. I . . . I killed Landey, Roger Landey."

Killilea's eyes widened. Landey, professor extraordinary, whose philosophy courses were booked solid two years in advance, whose deep wisdom and light touch had made legends before he was thirty . . . whose death four months earlier had shocked even the *Evening Graphic* into putting out a black-bordered edition.

"You *can't* really believe that you—"

"And someone else too. His name . . . they told me his name at a party." She wrinkled her brow and shook the wrinkles away impatiently. "I had a

name for him that was much better. He was a round little man. He made you want to pick him up and give him a hug. I called him Koala. I used to see him in the park. I gave him some leaves once, that's how I met him."

"Leaves?"

"Koalas look like teddy-bears and all they ever eat is eucalyptus leaves," she explained. "I saw him every day in the park and I began to wonder if he ever had any eucalyptus leaves, he reminded me so much of a Koala, I s'pose I thought he was one. I got some and went to him and gave them to him. He understood right away and laughed like . . . he laughed like you, Killy."

Killilea half-smiled through his distress, visualizing the scene; Prue so grave and silent, wordlessly handing the leaves to the man who looked like a koala . . . "Prue," he breathed. "Oh Prue . . ."

"I killed him too. The same way as the others, just the same. Here," she said suddenly. "Look, he gave me this." And from her pocketbook she drew a small cube and dropped it into his hand. It looked like blue glass, until he realized that it was not a cube but a chunk of monoclinic crystal,

"What is it?"

"It's lovely," was her typical answer. "Cup it in your hands, make it dark, and peek."

He put his hands together with the crystal inside, and brought it up to his eye. The crystal phosphoresced . . . no, he realized excitedly, it was fluorescing with a beautiful deep-blue glow, which had about it the odd "black-halo" characteristic of ultraviolet. But luminescents don't fluoresce without an energy source of some kind. Unless—"What is it?"

"You mean, what's it made of? I don't know. Isn't it just lovely?"

"Who . . . who was this Koala?" he asked faintly.

"Someone very fine," she said. Then she added, in a whisper, "That I killed."

"Don't say that ever again, Prue," he said harshly.

"All right. But it's true no matter what I say."

"What can I do?" he asked in despair. "How can I make you understand that these are crazy coincidences, that you had nothing to do with them?"

"Make me understand that I couldn't kill you, too, the same way. Can you do that?"

"Just take my word for it."

"No."

"Trust me. You used to trust me, Prue."

"You used to tell me things that were so. You used to say things that came true. But if you'd begun to say this table is not a table, that lark isn't singing, it's a noise a cow makes . . . then I never could have trusted you at all."

"But—"

"Prove it to me, Killy. Find a way. I mean a real way, not words, not just clever ideas all strung out like a diamond necklace, all dazzling and going right around in a circle. Prove it a real way, like one of the things you did in chemistry. Build it, and show it to me. You can't show me I didn't kill those others, because I did. But show me I can't kill you, and I'll come . . . come home."

He looked at her for a long moment. Then he said, "I'll prove it to you."

"You won't ask me to come with you until you prove it?"

"I won't ask you," he said heavily.

"Oh, good, good," she said thankfully. "Because I can see you, if you'll promise that. I can see you and talk with you. Killy, I've missed you so very much."

They were together for a while longer. They let the waiter serve them. They exchanged addresses and left, and outside they parted.

Killilea thought, I had my work to keep me busy, and then I had Prue to look for. And I used to figure if I couldn't find her, I'd spend the rest of my life looking. If I could find her, I'd spend the rest of my life with her. I never thought what I might do if I found her and she wouldn't come home.

And here that's happened. But instead of a great big empty nothin'-to-do, I've got something to build.

Once I start. But where do I start?

### III

**I**NCE home, he thought about that a great deal, while he smoked and paced. Part of the time he thought, this is no job for me. It's a psychopathologist's kick. And part of the time he thought, what can I do? I know I can do it, if I can only find the right thing to do. But I can't. And all this time he felt very bad. Then at last he thought about the one part of the problem you could pick up in your hand, look at, wonder about, find out . . . The crystal.

He sprang to the phone, scrawled through his number book, and dialed rapidly. The phone rang and rang at the other end, and Killilea was about to give up when a fast-asleep voice said "Hello," without a question mark.

"Hi. Egg?"

The voice came awake with a roar. "That's not Killilea?"

"Yup."

"Well godslemighty, where you been? What have you been doing for the last year? Hell, it's more than a year."

"Research," said Killilea, as the receiver made a yawning noise at him. "Gosh, Egmont, I just realized what time it is. I wake you?"

"Oh, that's all right. Like the man says, I had to get up to answer the phone anyway! What are you, up late or up early?"

"Egg, I'm racking my brains. Something I read some place, a crystal with a self-contained energy source that fluoresces."

"There's no such," said Egmont.

"Blue. Right up near the u-v," persisted Killilea.

"Know anything about the lattice?"

"No. It's monoclinic, though."

"Hm. Nup—hey—wait! There is such a thing. But nobody ever gets to see one."

"No?" \*

"Not for a while yet. High-level blue, you say? I think what you're talking about is stilbene, crystallized after an infusion of tritium."

"Tritium!"

"Like I said, son. You won't find 'em on the toy counters this Christmas. Or next either, now that Pretorio checked out."

"Oh. Was that one of his tricks?" Killilea asked.

"His big trick," said Egmont. "Set up a whole line of constant light sources that way. Bid fair to do for crystallography what Jo-blocks did for the machine shop. Still a lot to do on it, though, and Pretorio was the boy could do it. Why, Killy? What's up?"

"Just got to worrying where I read about it. Egg, did you know Pretorio personally?"

"Had lunch with him one time. He was thirty-eight chairs due north of me. A convention banquet. Speaking of banquets and Pretorio, Killy, remember my offer to take you to the Ethical Science Board dinner one of these years?"

"Gosh yes! That'd be—"

"It wouldn't be," said the telephone. "I'm not going."

"I thought you were—"

"All het up about it? I was. I still am, about the main idea. But the outfit is but dead."

"I didn't know."

"What you expect?" barked Egmont. "Here's the finest idea of the century, see—to establish a genuine ethic for science, right across the board; to study the possible end effects on humanity of any progress in any science. They had Pretorio to run it, Landey the philosopher to steer it, and Karl Monck to correlate it with politics. And they're all dead. So where do you go when your car's suddenly missing a motor, the steering gear and a driver? I tell you, Killy, if some master-mind had set out to wreck the first real chance this crazy world ever had to get onto itself, he couldn't have done it more efficiently."

"But couldn't someone else—"

THE wires sizzled. "Someone else!" Egmont inflected it like profanity. "Those three were unique, but not as unique as the fact that they were contemporaries. Where else are we going to find scientists who can buck the trend of anti-science?"

"Huh?"

"Yes, anti-science! Even the politicians are saying we have to turn to higher spiritual accomplishments *because* of what science has created. But their way of doing it will be to stop science from creating anything. It's a little like blaming the gunsmith every time somebody gets shot, but that's what's happening. Hell, four-fifths of the stories in science fiction magazines are anti-scientific." Egmont paused to breathe—at last—and said in more subdued tones, "Looka me. Off on a hobby horse, straight out of a sound sleep. Sorry, Killy. I'm lecturing."

"Gosh no," said Killilea. "Man's got something important to get excited about, he gets excited. Egg—"

"Mmm?"

"What did Pretorio look like?"

"Pretorio? Mild little guy. Pudgy." There was a pause while Egmont scanned a mental photograph. "He looked like one of those gentle little tree-climbing bears in Australia, know what I mean?"

"Koala," said Killilea.

"Something the matter Killy?"

God yes. "No, Egg . . . look, go back to bed. Swell talking to you again. I'll give you a buzz for lunch or a beer or something, sometime."

"Great," said Egmont. "Do that. Soon, huh? 'Night."

Slowly Killilea hung up and went to sit on the edge of his bed. He thought, I quit chemistry because I was about to isolate the most ghastly substance this earth has ever known, and I didn't want it isolated.

But I think someone has finished my work. . . .

KILLILEA, as anyone who met him could attest, was not an ordinary

man. The ways in which he was extraordinary did not include fictional commonplaces like the easy familiarity with phones, cabs and the police methods of a private eye and the adventure-hero's fisty resourcefulness. He was a scientist—or rather, an ex-scientist—rather more sure of things he did not believe in than those in which he did. His personal habits tended toward those of a hermit, though intellectually he recognized no horizons. He was at a serious disadvantage with other people because of a deep conviction that people were good. And though he had found that most were good, the few who were not invariably caught him off-guard. His work in biochemistry had been esoteric in the extreme, and he had worked in it alone. But even if it had been more general an endeavor, he would not comfortably have worked with anyone else.

SO NOW he found himself very much alone; no allies, no confidants. Yet he had always worked this way in the lab; you find a brick that fits a brick, and see what you can build with them. Or you know what to build, and you find the bricks that will do the job.

He called Prue late the next morning, and she was not at home. So he went back to the restaurant where he had found her, not expecting to see her, but simply because he felt he could think better there.

The table they had had was vacant. He sat down and ordered some lunch and a bottle of ale, and stared at the chair she had used. Somewhere, he thought, there is a lowest common denominator in all this. Somewhere the deaths of three great liberal scientists in Prue's arms, and the work I have been doing are tied together. Because what I almost had was a thing that would make men die that way. And since it was men it would work on, and not women, then Prue isn't the lowest common denominator.

Under the arch which separated the dining room from the bar a man stopped and gasped audibly. Killy looked up

into the man's shocked face, then turned around to find out what had so jolted him. A wall, some tables—nothing else. Killy turned back again and now had time to recognize the man—the philosophic barfly, Hartog. "Hi."

Hartog came forward timidly. "Oh. Mr.—uh . . ."

"Killilea. You all right?"

Hartog hesitated, his hand on a chair. "I—I get a twinge now and again," he said. "I don't want to horn in."

"Sit down," said Killilea. The man looked badly shaken. "Well," he said, and sat down. Killilea beckoned the waiter. "Had lunch?"

Hartog shook his head. Killilea ordered a double sirloin. "Medium rare all right?" and when Hartog agreed gratefully, sent the waiter off.

"Is your hand all right?" Hartog asked. "I'm real sorry about that."

Killilea noticed he had removed the ring. "I told you last night to forget it. Uh—while people are apologizing, I just remembered I belted out of that bar sort of suddenly last night. Did I pay or not?"

"Yes, it's all right," said the other. His fierce brows drew together. "I sort of had the idea you went after that funny little girl I was telling you about."

"You did?"

"Well, I don't want to pry," said Hartog mildly. "Just wondered how you made out, that's all."

Killilea let the subject lie unnoticed until it went away. He finished his ale and waved the bottle at the waiter.

"Women are trouble," Hartog mumbled.

"I heard," said Killilea.

"I like to know where I stand," Hartog said reflectively. "Like if I have a girl, I like to know is she my girl or not."

"When you say *your* girl," asked Killilea, "what do you mean?"

"Well, you know. She's not playing around."

"Do you talk about women all the time?" Killilea demanded with some irritation.

## STARTLING STORIES

HARTOG answered mildly, in his un-insulted way, "I guess I do. Does it make you mad, your girl two-timing you? I mean," he added quickly and apologetically, "say you have a girl and she does play around."

"It wouldn't happen," Killilea said bluntly. "Not to me."

"You mean any woman does that to you, you'll throw her out?"

"That's not what I mean," said Killilea. He pushed back a little and let the waiter set out the steak and the two bottles of ale.

"Fidelity," said Hartog. "What about fidelity? You don't think it's a good thing?"

"I think it's a bad thing," said Killilea.

"Oh," said Hartog.

"What's the matter?"

Hartog, in two senses, addressed his steak. With his mouth full, he said, "I had you figured as a man would stick by a woman, whatever."

"You figured right."

"But you just said—"

"Look," said Killilea, "I don't know what the word 'fidelity' was supposed to mean when people first began to use it, but it's come to mean being faithful, not to a person, but to a set of regulations. It's a kind of obedience. A woman that brags about fidelity to her husband, or a man that's puffed up because he's faithful to his wife—these people are doing what one or two zebras, a few fleas, and millions of dogs do—obey. Point is, they have to be trained to do it. They have to develop a special set of muscles to stay obedient. It's a—a task. I think it's a bad thing."

"Yeah, but you—"

"Me," said Killilea. "If what I have with someone needs no extra set of muscles—if I don't and couldn't want anyone else—then I'll stick with it. Not because I'm obedient. But because I couldn't do anything else. I'd have to have the extra set of muscles to break away."

"Yeah," said Hartog, "but suppose your girl don't feel the same way?"

"Then we wouldn't have anything. See what I'm driving at? If you have to work at it, it isn't worth it."

"So when you don't have that kind of a life with someone, what do you do—play the field, I guess, huh?"

"No," said Killilea. "I have that kind of a life, or none at all."

"Sounds like a lazy man's way to me," said Hartog, the timidity of his eyes taking the sting out of the statement.

Killilea smiled again. "I said I wouldn't work at it," he said softly. "I didn't say I wouldn't work for it."

"So you wait for the one woman you can live like that with," said Hartog, "and unless you find that one, you pass 'em all up, and if you do find her, you pass up all the others. Right?"

"Right."

Hartog said, "Those regulations you talked about, don't they call for just that kind of living?"

"I suppose."

"Then what's the difference?"

"I guess," said Killilea, "it's in the way you feel when you do it because you want to and not because you're told to."

"Oh."

"You know, you sound downright disappointed."

Hartog met his eyes. "Do I? Well, maybe . . . I had a chick I thought maybe you should meet. You are alone, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Killilea, and thought of Prue with a pang. Then his eyes narrowed. "You were going on like this last night too. Are you *sure* you're in the refrigerator business?"

"Aw, don't get salty," said Hartog. "It's just I hate to see anybody lonesome when he don't have to be."

"You're very kind," said Killilea sourly. "I wish you hadn't gone to the trouble."

"Shucks," said Hartog. "You're mad. You shouldn't get mad. Just wanted to do what I could, and only found out it was wrong by doing it."

Killilea laughed, relenting.

"Killy. . . ."

He leapt to his feet. Prue had come in so quietly he had not seen her. But then, she always moved like that.

"Hello," said Hartog.

"I'll come back later," said Prue to Killilea.

**W**ITH that, Hartog forked in a lump of steak as big as his two thumbs, and rose. "I got to go anyhow," he said slushily around it. He looked at Killilea, fumbled toward his pocket.

"Forget it," said Killilea. "I'll pick up the tab."

"Thanks," said Hartog. "Thanks a lot. So long."

"Good-by," said Killilea.

"By," said Hartog to Prue.

Prue turned to Killilea. "I hadn't hoped to see you so early today."

Hartog hesitated embarrassedly, then went out through the arch. "What's the matter, Prue?"

"I don't like him," she said in a low voice.

Killilea remembered, belatedly, Hartog's account of his fruitless efforts to get somewhere with the funny little girl with one ear lobe. He had a moment of fury, and quickly molded it into laughter by application of some objectivity.

"He's harmless," he said. "Forget him, Prue. Sit down. Have you had lunch?"

"I'd like an apple," she said. "And some toast."

He ordered them, deeply pleased in some strange way because it was unnecessary to suggest anything else to her. It was good to know her so well. Soft and strange and so very sure . . . Prue . . . he felt a surge of longing that almost blinded him, and he all but put out his arms hungrily to her. But with the impulse came the thought, I know so well that an apple and some toast is her lunch, the only lunch she wants; and I know just as well that she was just that sure when she said she wouldn't come home.

He took her hands and put his face close to hers so she could see how serious he was. "Prue, I need help.

You'll help me, won't you, Prue?"

"Oh yes. . . ."

"I'll have to talk about 'important' things."

"I don't know if I can help with those," she half-smiled.

"I'll have to talk about chemistry."

"I won't understand."

"I'll have to talk about Koala and the others. . . ."

"Oh. . . ."

"You'll help me, won't you?"

"Killy, I'll try."

"Thank you, Prue."

"Why don't you ever call me 'darling' and 'sweetheart'?"

"Because 'Prue' means all those things and says them better."

#### IV

**P**RUE nodded gravely at his explanation, not flattered, not amused, having asked and received information. She waited.

"I have a lot of pieces, but not enough," he began. "I can put some together, but not enough. They make some sense, but not enough." He lifted his glass and stared at the fine lacework of foam that clung to the inside surface. With one finger he wiped away a little semicircle of it, and then another, until he had the words he needed.

"Chemistry is a strange country where sometimes the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, if you put the right parts on top. When one reaction finishes with *blue*, and another reaction finishes with *hot*, and you put the end products together and the result is bluer and hotter than the blue one and the hot one before, that's synergy."

"Synergy," Prue repeated dutifully.

"The thing that made me leave chemistry was something so fascinating that I followed it too far, and so complicated that it would take me most of the day to explain it to somebody who knew my branch as well as I do. It's up a broad highway and sharp left down a little road that no one knows is there, and across a sticky place to a pathway,

and then out where no one's ever been before.

"That's an analogy, and so was what I was doing. I was trying to understand what happens chemically throughout the whole sexual process. That's an orchestration, you know, with more pieces in its music than any conductor ever used. There are subtle and tiny parts to be played by finely made and exquisitely measured chemicals — so much from the strings, so much from the brasses. And there are cues to be followed, so that the flutes are silent until they can pick up the theme the horns give them.

"And that's an analogy of an analogy, the music that sweeps on to its climax and is scored from beginning to end. But there are even chemical motifs that aren't scored, for they happen before the music and after it, in silence. In a man's head, nestled deep down below and between the halves of his brain, lies a little nubbin which has a strange and wonderful power, for it can take a thought, or the very shadow of a thought, and with it sound an A that can send the whole orchestra rustling and trembling, tuning up. And there are chemical workers who let the curtain down, send the musicians away to do other work—they're all very talented and can do many things—and pack away the chairs and music stands.

"In my chemical analogy I made a working model of that process; if the real thing was music, mine was poetry that strove to create the same feelings; if the real thing was the course of a hunting swallow, mine was the trajectory of a hungry stingray.

"I did it, and it worked, and I should have left it alone. Because through it I found a substance which did to the music what you do when you turn off your phono-amplifier. This substance killed, and it did it just at that great final resolving crescendo. I isolated it because it made the experiment fail and it had to be removed. The experiment then succeeded—but I had found this terrible substance.... I left chemistry."

His hands, twined together, crackled suddenly. She touched them to cool them. "Killy, that was just an analogy, though. It wouldn't work on a person."

**H**E LOOKED away from the hands to her face. "The analogy was too clear, too close. Anyone who understood it could follow it through, and apply it. You don't need a Manhattan project to make any but the first bomb. All you need after that is a factory. You don't need scientists—engineers will do. And when they're done with it, all you need is mechanics.

"Prue, Prue . . . it's synergy, you see? All the products of all the ductless glands, tempered and measured to build the climax, and then the tiny triggering, and the synergistic reaction flooding into the medulla, where a marvellous being lives, telling the heart when to beat, the lungs to expand, even instructing the microscopic fingers of the cilia which nudge the nutrients through the yards of digestive tract. The medulla simply stops, and everything stops. Yes, yes, heart failure," he almost sobbed.

"But Killy . . . you didn't make any of it!"

"No, I didn't. But I found out how, and I want no part of it."

"A dream," she said. "A horror. But—it's something in a museum. It can't get out. Poison in a locked cabinet—a guillotine in a picture-book—they can't get out to hurt people, Killy."

"You're my Prue because you could never in a thousand years see how this could get out and hurt people," he said thickly. "Because you have your world and you live in it your way, and it doesn't touch this other, where two billions team and plan and ferment evil. Let me tell you the ugly thing then." He wet his lips. "Do you know what would happen with this substance in a world where men can soberly plan the use of such a thing as an H-bomb? I'll tell you. It would be snatched up. It would be synthesized by the bucket, by the thousand-gallon tank. It would be sprayed

out as a mist over human beings and their cities and their land. And then the ghastly thing that has happened to you three times already would happen to thousands, to millions of women. *Liebestod—love-death.*"

Her face was chalky. "It *was* me, then. It's been done to me. . . ."

"No!" he roared. Heads turned all over the restaurant, and that was a blessing, because it brought him into the present where he had to remember appearances and modes and manners, and, remembering, relieve the awful pressure of what he was saying. "This synergy is purely a complex of male functions. The synergic factor would be absorbed painlessly and without warning, through the lungs, through any tiny break in the skin. Then it would lie in wait until just the proper impulse of just the mixture of hormones and enzymes, and all their fractions, set it free. And that is. . . ."

"*Liebestod,*" she whispered.

"You still don't realize how devilish this is. Being you, you can't. You see, it would do more than kill men and put their women through the hell you already know. It would throw a city, a whole nation, a culture, into an unthinkable madness. You know the number of pitiful sicknesses that are traced to frustration. Who would dare to relieve frustration with a ghostly killer like that loose in the land? What of the conflicts within each man, once the thing was defined for him? (And defined it must be, because the people must be warned!) Do you know of the old psychology-class joke, 'Don't think of a white horse'? What else could a man afraid to be alone, he'd be afraid to read, he'd be afraid to sleep, he'd be afraid to be alone, and he'd be afraid to be with others. In a week there would be suicides and mutilations; in two they would start to murder their women to get them out of sight. And all the while no man would truly know whether the sleeping devil lay within him or not. He'd feel it stir and murmur whether it was there or not."

"And their women would watch this, and slowly understand it. And the little children would watch, and they would never understand it, and perhaps that is the worst thing of all."

"And this is my accomplishment."

Nothing, nothing at all could be said at that time. But she could be with him. She could sit there and let him know she was close, while he lost himself for a long moment in the terrible pictures that flashed and burned across the inner surface of his closed eyelids. . . .

**A**T LAST he could see again. He tried to smile at her, the kind of tortured effort that a woman remembers all her life. "So you can come home with me," he said shakily.

"No, Killy."

All he did was to close his eyes again.

"Don't, Killy, please don't," she wept. "Listen to me. Understand me. You didn't make the factor—but someone has. You say there's no way of knowing whether it's within you or not. Well, it was there in three men who died, and it may be in you."

"And it may not," said Killilea hoarsely. "If not—good. And if it is—do you think I've wanted to live, this last year and a half?"

"It doesn't matter what you want!" she snapped. "Think of me. Think of me, think of yourself dying that way, with me . . . and each time might be the last, and it would all be a hell where every love-word was a threat. . . . No, Killy!"

"What, then? What else?"

"You have to stop it. There's got to be a way to stop it. You have a clue—Landey and Karl and Koala. Think, Killy! What had they in common?"

"You," he said cruelly.

Any other woman on earth would have killed him for that. But not Prue. She didn't even notice it, except as part of the subject in hand. "Yes," she said eagerly. "Why, then? Why me?"

"I wouldn't know that." Almost in spite of himself, his brain began to

search, to piece, to discard and rematch. "They were all scientists. Well, not Karl Monck. I don't know—maybe he was a sort of thought-scientist. A human engineer."

"They were all—good," she said. "Gentle and thoughtful. They truly cared about people."

"They were all members of the Ethical Science Board. Pretorio founded it. It's going to die without them, too."

"What was it supposed to do?"

"Synthesize. Make people understand science—not what it is, but what it's for. Make scientists in one branch understand scientists in another—keep them working toward the same ends, with the same sense of responsibility. A wonderful thing, but there's no one left who has both science and ethics to such a degree that the Board can be anything but a social club."

Her eyes glowed. This was a thing she could really understand. "Killy, would anyone want to stop work like that?"

"Only a madman. Why, such a Board could—"

"I think I know what it could do. What kind of a madman, Killy?"

**H**E THOUGHT about it. "Perhaps the old-time 'robber-baron'—the international munitions-maker, if he still existed, which he doesn't, since governments took over the munitions trade."

"Or someone who might try to sell it to the highest bidder?"

"I wouldn't think so, Prue. A man can get terribly twisted, but I can't believe a mind capable of reasoning a series of reactions as complex as this one could fail to see consequences. And one very likely consequence is the end of an environment where his riches would mean anything."

"Every pathway has a big 'No' sign," she murmured.

"That's what I've been living with," he said bitterly.

They were silent until Prue said, "They were all like you."

"What? Oh—those three . . . what-

ever do you mean, Prue? Karl with his deep socio-political insights, me with nothing but bewilderment in the everyday world. Landey, that philosophy of his . . . oh, Prue! He was a scholar and a humorist; that isn't me! And Pretorio, your koala—him and his EINAC brain! No, you couldn't be more wrong."

"I'm right," she said. "They were like you. I couldn't have been with them if they weren't."

"Thank you," he said ardently, "but how?"

"None of them were . . . pretty men," she said slowly. "They all respected homo sapiens, and themselves for being members of it, for all they feared it. They all feared it the way a good sailor fears a hurricane; they feared it competently. They all laughed the way you do, from deep down. And they all still knew how to wonder like children."

"I don't quite know what to say to that."

"You can believe me. You can believe *me*, Killy."

"I do, then; but that doesn't help." Again he plunged into thought, seeking, turning, testing. "There's only one single hypothesis so far. It's crazy. But—here goes. Someone was gunning for those three, maybe because of the Ethical Science Board. He discovered my fractionations and synthesis, maybe independently, maybe not. Maybe not," he repeated, and filed the question in his mental 'pending' folder.

"Anyway, he succeeds—I don't know how; he injects the factor into those three men without their knowing it; he divines that all three would find you deeply appealing; he sees to it that each in turn meets you. He must have kept a pretty close watch on things, all the time—" Prue shuddered—"and so he kills them."

Prue said, in a dead voice, "You can add to that." She took his hand. "There were not three, but four men he was after, and he wants you to take me back home. If that doesn't work he will try something else. Killy, be careful, careful!"

"Why?" he asked, and cracked his knuckles against the side of his head. "Why? What would anyone gain that way?"

"You said it yourself. It would cripple the Board, maybe kill it. Oh, and another thing! If he knows about the factor, how to make it, how to use it, he probably knows that you know it, too. He wouldn't want that, don't you see? He wouldn't want someone like you around, alert, watching for some sign of that hellish thing, ready to tell the authorities, the Government, the Board about it. He'd want that secret kept until it was too late to stop it.

"You'll have to find him and kill him."

"I'm not a killer," he said.

"There isn't any other way. I'll help you."

"There are always other ways." He was shocked.

"You're so . . . damn . . . wonderful," she said suddenly.

**A**GAIN he was shocked. It was the first time he had ever heard her say "damn."

"I had a think," she said detachedly. The phrase thrilled the part of him that was always so nerve-alive to her; so many rich moments had begun with her sudden, "Killy, I had a think. . . ."

"Tell me your think," he said.

"It was after I went away," she said, "and I was alone, and I had the think, and you weren't there. I made a special promise to save it for you. Here is the think: There is a difference between morals and ethics, and I know what it is."

"Tell me your think," he said again.

"An act can be both moral and ethical. But under some circumstances a moral act can be counter to ethics, and an ethical act can be immoral."

"I'm with you so far," he said.

"Morals and ethics are survival urges, both of them. But look: an individual must survive within his group. The patterns of survival within the group are morals."

"Gotcha. And ethics?"

"Well, the group itself must survive, as a unit. The patterns of an individual within the group, toward the end of group survival, are ethics."

Cautiously, he said, "You'd better go on a bit."

"You'll see it in a minute. Now, morals can dictate a pattern to a man such that he survives within the group, but the group itself may have no survival value. For example, in some societies it is immoral *not* to eat human flesh. But to refrain from it would be ethical, because that would be toward group survival. See?"

"Hey." His eyes glowed. "You're pretty damn wonderful yourself. Lessee. It was 'moral' to kill Jews under Hitler, but unethical in terms of the survival of Humanity."

"It was even against the survival of Germany."

He looked at her in fond amazement. "Did you bring all this out because of what I said—I'm not a killer?"

"Partly," said Prue. "Even if I agreed that killing that hypothetical devil of ours was immoral—which I wouldn't—what about the ethics of it?"

He grinned. "Check, comma, mate. I'll kill him." The grin faded. "You said 'partly.' Why else do I get this study in pragmatism?"

"I'll tell you when you're uncluttered a bit. That is, if you don't think of it yourself first. Now then: how do we find him?"

"We might wait until he goes after me."

"Don't even think that way!" she said, paling.

"I'm serious. If that's the only way, then we'll do it. But I admit I'd rather think of another. Good gosh, Prue, he has an identity. He's been around, watching—he *must* have been. He's someone we know."

"Start with the fractionations. Did you keep notes that anyone might have seen?"

"Not after I began to suspect what I was getting to, and that was com-

paratively early. Up to that point it was fairly routine. I told you it went off into a side-road no one knew about."

"Could anyone have studied your apparatus—what was left in the stills and thingummies?"

"The stills and thingummies were cleaned enough and dismantled enough to bewilder anyone, every day when I was through with them," he said positively. "You do just so much classified and secret work and you get into habits like that. Of course, some of that apparatus was—no," he said, and shook his head. "It wouldn't tell anyone anything unless they knew the exact order in which the pieces were set up."

"You weren't a Board member at all," she mused.

"Me? I was a hermit—remember? Oh, sure, I knew I'd join it some time. Matter of fact, I had a date for their banquet next month, which was cancelled. Fellow who was taking me is dropping out because of those deaths. Says the Board is dying or dead already." Prue seemed to be waiting for something, so he said "Why?" He thought he detected the smallest slump of disappointment in her shoulders.

"Could there have been anything the Board was about to do that would be undesirable or dangerous to anyone?"

"Now, that I wouldn't know." He scratched his ear. "I think I can find out, though. Hold on. Don't go away." He sprang to his feet, stopped, and turned back. "Prue," he said softly, "you're not going to go away again, are you?"

"Not now," she said, her eyes bright.

He went to the telephone, dropped in a coin and dialed Egmont's number. "Hello—Egg? Hiya. Killy here."

"What is it you want, Killilea?"

## V

**K**ILLILEA had already started to talk by the time he realized how formal and frigid Egmont's voice was. A small frown appeared, but he went right on. "Look, you were pretty much

in on the Ethical Science Board doings until recently, weren't you?"

There was a pause. Then "Suppose I was?"

"Cut the rib, Egghead," said Killilea. "This is serious. What I want to find out is, do you know if Pretorio or Monck or Landey, singly or in combination, had anything up their sleeves before they were killed? Some bombshell, or very important announcement that they were about to spring at a meeting?"

"Whatever I know, Killilea, I most certainly am not passing on to you. I want to make that absolutely clear to you."

Killilea's jaw dropped. Like most men who genuinely liked people, he was extraordinarily vulnerable to this sort of thing. "Egg!" he gasped, then, almost timidly, "This is Egmont . . . Richard Egmont?"

"This is Egmont, and I have no information for you, not now or ever."

*Click!*

Killilea walked slowly back to the table, rubbing his ear, which was still stinging.

Prue looked up, and started. "Killy! What happened?"

He told her. "Egg," he said. "Hell, I've known him for . . . what do you suppose is eating . . . why, I never—"

Prue patted his arm. "I hate it when something hurts you. Why didn't you ask him what was wrong?"

"I didn't have time," said Killilea miserably. "Hey!" he barked. "Somebody's been working on him. If we can find out who—"

"That's it, that's it," said Prue. "Call him again!"

Back in the booth, Killilea set his jaw and waited for the first sound of Egmont's voice. Being struck under his guard was one thing: going after something he urgently wanted was something else again.

"Hello?"

"Listen, you," growled Killilea. "Hang up on me and so help me I'll come over there to that office of yours, gag your secretary and kick your door down. The

only way you can get rid of me is over the phone."

He could hear Egmont's furious breathing. Finally, "I don't care what you do, you're not getting any Board information out of me."

"Hold it!" snapped Killilea as he sensed the other receiver coming down. Egmont said "Well?"

"All I want to know is what's gotten into you since last night. You sound like I'd punched your grandmother, and I haven't even seen her."

"You're a pandering little scut," growled Egmont.

Killilea squeezed his eyes tight and bit back the rage that had begun to churn inside him. "Egmont," he said somberly, "we were friends for a long time. If you did something I didn't like I might write you off, but damn it I'd tell you why first. At least you owe me that. Come on—tell me what's with you. I honest-to-God don't know."

"All right," said Egmont, his voice shaking. "You asked for it. I'm going to tell you a thing or two about your buddy that you don't know."

"Buddy? What buddy?"

"Just shut up and listen," hissed Egmont. "You make me madder every time you open your mouth. Jules Croy, that's what buddy. You and your bright and cheerful questions about the Board. This is the guy that's taking over what's left of the Board and making a marching and chowder society out of it—a damned jackal, a corpse-eater."

"But I don't—"

"More money than he knows what to do with, and nothing to do with his time but hatch up what's left of the finest damn. . . ." He subsided to a splutter, and then growled, "And you. Spying around, seeing what you can pick up. You're just right for it, too, the hermit with the big name in science, back in circulation again, picking up loose ends. Well, anybody I can get to won't have any ends to give you. You louse!"

"Now you hold it right there," flared Killilea. "That's damn well enough,

Egmont. I've heard of this Croy—who hasn't? But I wouldn't know him if he was in this phone booth with me. I've never had a single damned word with him!"

**E**GMONT'S voice was suddenly all disdainful amazement. "If I didn't know you were a rat by now, this would clinch it. Who'd you have lunch with today?"

"Lunch? Oh—some character. A barfly I met last night. Name's Hartog. What's that got to do with—"

"Lie to the end, won't you? Well, it'll amaze you to know that I ducked into the bar at Roby's for a standup lunch today at one-thirty and saw you with my own eyes."

"You better get those eyes retreaded," snarled Killilea. "Why didn't you take the trouble to walk over and make sure?"

"If I ever got close enough to Jules Croy to talk to him, I'd tear his head off. And from now on the same goes for you. And if I hear one syllable from you on this phone again, I'll slam this thing down so hard I'll shunt it clear down to your end."

This time Killilea was ready, and had the receiver away from his ear when the crash came.

"It seems," he told Prue tiredly, "that I was seen having lunch with an a-ch-villain, who has tainted me. I didn't have lunch with anyone but the man you saw. Hartog."

"I don't like him," Prue said, for the second time that day. "Who was the villain?"

"Name's Croy, Jules Croy," said Killilea. Prue shook her head vaguely. "I've heard of him. One of those business octopi, finger in this, fifty thousands shares in that. Always buying up educators and research people with bequests. Egmont says he's trying to make a sort of glorified Parent-Teacher's Association out of what's left of the Ethical Science Board. Egg's always been real passionate about the Board, and it was like losing an arm to him

when it folded. I guess he needed something to be real mad at, and the idea of me spying for this Croy supplied it."

"What about this man you had lunch with, this Hartog?"

"Oh, he's harmless. Interesting sometimes, the way one of those medical museums that feature replicas of skin diseases in life-size wax models is interesting. Did he give you a bad time?"

"Who—that little man?"

"I gather he made a series of passes . . ."

"Oh," she said. "That. That never bothers me, Killy. You know that."

He knew it. When anyone irritated or bored her, she could leave the room without stirring from her chair. Her fogbound mood was absolutely impervious. "Oh," he said. "I thought . . . but you say he annoyed you."

"I didn't. I said I didn't like him. He . . . was the one who introduced me to Landey. And Koala—Dr. Pretorio—he knew him too. Koala and I once went to a party where he was. Compared to them, Hartog is such a little snipe."

"Knew Pretorio . . . hmm. Prue, did he know Karl Monck too?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. Killy, what is it?"

"Let me think . . . let me think." Suddenly he brought his hand down on the table, hard. "Prue! Hartog is the one who found you for me. He introduced himself to me at a bar down the street . . . let me see if I can remember exactly how . . . he questioned me in that funny way of his, I remember. He made sure of my name—yes, and—"

He looked down at his right palm. "What is it?" asked Prue, terror in her voice at the expression on his face.

"When we shook hands," he said evenly, "he scratched me. Look. With a ring he wore. A big cheap ring, the stone was missing, but the mounting had an edge."

Anger and terror mingled and mounted in the look they exchanged.

"I was right," she whispered. "You

see . . . if I'd come home last night—oh, Killy!"

He looked at the hand. He felt as if he had been kicked in the stomach.

"Is there a—an antidote?"

**H**E SHOOK his head. "It's not the sort of thing that has an antidote. I mean, an acid poison can be counteracted by a base chemical of equal strength and opposite action. But things like this—hormones, for example. Progesterone and testosterone have opposite end effects, but a very similar way of bringing them about. I've never made any of this stuff, you know. I can't tell exactly how it acts or how long it lasts unless I do. It would surely have an active period, and then get absorbed and excreted like any hormone. How long that would be, I don't really know. I've got to develop a test for it. Another test for it," he said, giving her a painful grin.

"Well, at least we know. Now—this nasty little Hartog. Do you suppose Egmont was right? Could he really be this Jules Croy?"

"I guess he could. I'm trying to recall what happened today, at lunch. He came in—yes, that's right, he saw me and stopped dead, and I never saw a more astonished man."

"He sent you to me last night, didn't he? He must have known you were looking for me. He cut you with his ring, and he told you where I was, and he must have been sure that—no wonder he was astonished! You shouldn't have been alive today! Well—what did he say?"

"An involved sort of philosophic conversation. As usual with him, it was about sex." He thought back. "What it amounted to, now that I look back on it, was an attempt to pump me for information about you, and when that drew a blank, an effort to find some other woman for me, and then some delving into why I wasn't at all interested. It all fits," he said, almost awed. "The warped, wealthy little misfit, trying to buy his way into the high levels

of science, trying to get control of the Ethical Science Board, removing the men who would have no use for his kind. He'll run it, Prue—it'll still attract every real scientist who has more humanity than a milling machine—and the men he can't control he'll eliminate. He has my factor as a weapon, and if that ever doesn't work, he can certainly think of other ways."

"The factor—how did he get it?"

"That's the one thing I can't figure," Killilea said grimly. "We'll ask him." He looked at his watch. "Come on. We have things to do. I need a laboratory."

## VI

**T**HE first part was easy.

It was two nights later. Prue sat alone, pale and unhappy-looking, at a table at Roby's. A cigarette burned to a long ash in the ashtray. An untouched drink stood warming in front of her. And—

"Well, hello," said Hartog.

"Oh," she said. She gave him a fleeting smile. He sat down quickly, opportunistically. "Expecting anyone?"

"No," she said.

"Oh," he said, in his ferocious, timid way. "Dined yet?"

"Not yet," she said. She took out a cigarette and waited. He fumbled in his pockets, and she glanced at the silver lighter lying next to her cigarettes. He mumbled an apology, picked it up, used it. When he put it down he looked puzzledly at his thumb. "I'm glad you came," she said.

He was surprised and showed it. "I guess I'm glad too," he said. He circled his thumb with his other hand and might have pressed it, but she reached out impulsively and took one of his hands in hers. "You haven't ever really talked to me," she said softly. "You've never given me a chance to really know you."

He talked, then, and when the conversation edged over to his preoccupation, it found her unperturbed. They dined. Afterward he said he felt strange. She said she had a little apartment near-

by. Perhaps he'd be more comfortable there. . . .

She took him home.

She took his hat and coat and made him a drink and softly asked permission to change, and slipped into the bedroom. Hartog sat and sipped his drink and when he heard a sound behind him he said, "Come sit by me."

"All right," said Killilea.

Hartog came up off the couch as if it had contained a spark coil. Killilea circled the couch and pushed his chest. Hartog sat down again.

"Wh-what is this? The old badger game?"

"A much better game than that, Croy," said Killilea.

"Croy?"

"Your not going to deny it," said Killilea flatly. "Can you use a jeweler's loupe?"

"Use a what? What are you talking about? What is all this?"

"Here," said Killilea. Hartog took the loupe hesitatingly. "I want to show you something." Killilea scooped the silver lighter off the end table and sat down close to Hartog. He raised the snuffer-lid of the lighter and held it close to Hartog's face. "Look through the loupe. Look right there, at the spark wheel."

Hartog stared at him then screwed the loupe into his eye. Killilea took out a mechanical pencil and pointed with it. "Watch right there." With the tip of his finger on the side—not the rim—of the sprak wheel, he turned it. "See it, Croy?"

"No. Yes I do. A little hair."

"Not a hair. A needle."

"It worked fine, Killy," said Prue from the bedroom doorway. She had not changed. "He barely felt it."

"A little more refined than cutting someone with a finger ring," said Killilea.

"What have you done to me? Let me out of here!"

"What did you do to him?" Prue asked coldly, pointing at Hartog.

"Is this some sort of a joke? I told you I was sorry about cutting you. What sort of childish—"

"Shut up, Croy," said Killilea tiredly. "I know who you are and what you're up to."

"I don't know what you mean. Why are you calling me Croy? What do you want from me?"

"Not a thing. Not a thing in the world." Killilea crossed to the door and locked it. "Just sit there and take it easy."

"You know your biochemistry," said Prue. "You're going to have heart failure, poor man."

Hartog looked at his thumb. "You mean you . . . that this is going to—why, you idiot, that won't work unless I—" he stopped.

KILLILEA grinned coldly. "Unless you what?" When Hartog didn't answer, Killilea said, "Hospitality has its limits, after all. Much as we enjoy company . . ." The bantering dropped out of his voice. "You have the wrong idea. You're going to die, Croy. In a half hour or so. I didn't have the time or the apparatus to make up the factor you used on me. You've got a dose of a nice, simple, undetectable hormone poison."

"No!" gasped Hartog. "You *can't*! You mustn't! You've got this all wrong, Killilea. I swear it! I'm not what you think I am. . . ."

"Yes you are," said Killilea blackly. "I think you're a megalomaniac name of Jules Croy. I think you got on to my research in hormone-complex analogies. I think you used it to make some of the deadliest, most hellish extract that ever appeared on this earth. I'm sure that besides myself no one but you knows about it, and inside the hour no one but I will have it. It will be safe with me."

"What are you going to do with it?" Hartog asked faintly.

"Forget it. Pretend it never existed. . . . I see you're not denying anything any more."

"I'm Croy," said the man, with his

eyes closed. "You're doing the right thing with the factor. But you're *wrong* about me. Believe me, you are. And you're wrong about no one else knowing."

Killilea caught his breath. "Who else knows?" He demanded.

"I can't tell you that."

"He's lying," said Killilea. "Croy, we have thirty minutes or so to kill, and there's nothing that can save you now. Why go out full of lies? Why not tell the truth?"

"There's nothing you could do if I did . . . it's too late now. I'm the only one who could help." He looked up at them piteously. "Am I going to die? Am I really going to die?"

Killilea nodded.

"It's a hard idea to get used to," Croy said, as if to himself.

"Tough," said Killilea. He wiped his forehead. "If you think we're enjoying this, we're not."

"I know that," said Croy surprisingly.

"You're taking this better than I thought you would."

"Am I? I hate the idea of dying—no, I don't. It's the idea of being dead I hate."

"Still the barroom philosopher," Killilea sneered.

"Don't," said Prue. "We don't have to hurt him, Killy. We just want him dead."

"Thanks," said Croy. He looked at Killilea. "I'm going to tell you everything. I don't expect you to believe it. You will, though. That won't help me, of course; I'll be dead several weeks by that time. But as you say, I have a few minutes to kill . . ."

HE LAY back. Sweat glistened on his upper lip. "You give me too much credit, I'm no scientist. I wouldn't know a kesteroid from castor oil. I'm just a little man with a big bank account. I s'pose everyone has his poses. My analyst once told me I had a Haroun-al-Raschid pattern. Dressing up in cheap clothes and pretending to be

something less than I was . . . giving sums of money secretly to this one and that one, not to help, just to *affect* people. Intrigues, secrets . . . the breath of life to me. Breath of life . . . I feel awful. Is that symptomatic or psychosomatic?"

"*Symptomatic,*" said Killilea. "Go on. If you want to."

"It was Pretorio who got on to what you were doing. One of the few real all-around scientists in this century. Immense ability to extrapolate. He saw the directions your researches were taking you, and he got alarmed when you quit reporting progress but kept on working."

"But how did he *know?*?"

"Through me. I own Zwing & Rockwood."

Killilea clapped a hand to his head. "I *never* thought of that!"

"What, Killy? Who's Zwing and Rockwood?"

"Glassblowers! Work like mine calls for very special custom apparatus. And step by step, as I ordered apparatus—"

"That's it," nodded Croy. "For Pretorio it wasn't too tough. He was working right along with you the whole time. Sometimes he was ahead. Sometimes he would call and tell me exactly what piece of glass you'd order next."

"I *thought* I was getting fantastically good service."

"You were."

"What on earth was Pretorio after? Why didn't he come to me? How did you happen to be working with him?"

"What was he after? What he told me was that he was afraid you didn't know the possibilities of what you were doing. He was so afraid of it that he didn't want to tip you off by asking you. After all, he was the great extrapolator, you know. As for me, I was flattered. He had me completely spellbound. You just don't know what a tremendous man he was, what an—an aura he had."

"I do," said Prue.

"I did absolutely everything he told me to do. Some of it I couldn't understand, but I trusted him completely."

"And then he died."

"I went sort of crazy after that, I

guess. Didn't know what to do with myself. It was pretty bad. Then one day I got a call from a man with a husky voice. He said Pretorio had left him instructions. I didn't believe him at first, but when he started giving me details that no one but Pretorio could have told him, I had to believe."

"Who was he?"

"He never told me. I never met him. He said it had to be that way because he hadn't Pretorio's great reputation. But Pretorio's work had to go on. Well, I followed orders. You know about Landey, and then Monck. I was blind, stupid, I guess. You'll have to take my word for it that I injected both of them and introduced them to her—" he indicated Prue with his chin—"without knowing why they were dying. I thought it was heart failure, just like everyone else. I didn't even know she was with them when they died."

"What about Pretorio? You infected him, didn't you?"

"No, damn it, I didn't!" shouted Croy, his voice angry for the first time since he had started his narrative. "That must have been an accident—the one crazy accident that fell in line with the things I arranged. Or maybe he injected himself by accident. It doesn't take much, you know."

"I know," said Killilea grimly.

"Well, the day came when I got orders to do the same for you. I didn't know until then who she was. When I found that out I got some thinking done. It was like coming up out of a dream. I'd never doubted this man's word any more than I had Pretorio's, but now I did. I saw then what these deaths meant; I connected them with the Ethical Science Board that I was supposed to take over and run for this man; I saw suddenly how you four—Pretorio, Landey, Monck and yourself would have stood in his way. I called him back and refused to go on with him."

"He told me then what he was after. He told me what the factor was, what it could do, how the world had to be protected from it. He told me that you de-

veloped it, that unless you were stopped it would slip out of your hands and plunge the world into ruin. And about the Board, he said the world wasn't ready for a group that would efficiently cross-fertilize scientific specialties. We haven't caught up, as a culture, with the science we already have.

"I agreed with him and promised to go on."

"Why—the man is crazy! And so are you, for swallowing that drivel!"

"Who swallowed it? I knew then he was crazy, that he was responsible for the death of one of the finest men since Leonardo, that he'd made a murderer out of me and put you two through hell . . . so I made up my mind to play along with him until I could find out who he was. I was ready to kill him, but how do you kill a man unless you can find him, and how do you find him when you don't know his name or what he looks like?" He spread his hands, dropped them. "And that's all. I know it looks bad for me, and I guess I've earned what I'm getting. But—like I said . . . no one but me can find him, and by the time you get proof of that I'll be dead. He's going to kill you, you know. He's got to. He can't afford to have anyone else know about the factor."

Killilea strode across to the sofa and lifted a heavy fist.

"Killy!" cried Prue.

**W**ITH difficulty Killilea lowered the fist. "You're a liar," he said thickly. "If that ingenious story is true, why did you cut my hand with the ring?"

"I told you. I had to play it his way. But I didn't inject the factor! It was something else—something that may have saved your life. Progesterone."

"Why on earth progesterone?"

"Orders were to tell you where *she* was, see to it you went to her. You were looking for her; you wanted her back. It was a wonderful setup for his plan. I don't know too much about hormones, but I did what I could. I had the stuff compounded; progesterone and a large charge of SF—hyaluronidase, I think it

was—to make it spread."

"What on earth is that?" asked Prue.

"An enzyme. SF means 'spreading factor,'" said Killilea. "Lectures later, Prue. Go on, Croy."

"You had enough progesterone in you to bank your fire for a week," said Croy. "By that time I hoped to have the whole thing cracked."

"You sure were upset when you found me alive the next day."

"I was upset when I found you were there. I wanted to get you out of sight. I didn't know when my—my would-be boss might see you."

"Then why all the talk about finding me another chick?"

"I wanted to see if the hormone was working. I wanted to find out where you stood with *her*. But when she came in, there was nothing I could do. It was all right, anyway. As long as you were together, he could assume only that you were taking your time in making peace."

"An answer for everything," said Killilea. "How much of this do you believe, Prue?"

"I don't know," she said, troubled. To Croy she said, "Why didn't you tell us this before? Why didn't you tell me tonight, at dinner? Or even after you found Killy here?"

"Do you know of a scientist worth his salt that would even speak to me?" Croy said wistfully. "The first chance I ever had to do something really fine for science—I wasn't going to jeopardize that by getting slapped down when you found out who I was. Don't you see that's why I was so pleased to be able to work with Pretorio?"

"I remember what Egmont said about him," mused Killilea.

"Egmont," said Croy. "The crystallographer? Yes; a good case in point. He can't stand the sight of me. When he found out I was behind the scenes in the Board membership I thought he would explode."

"He did explode," said Killilea. "Prue, we've got quite a story to tell the Egg."

"There'll be time for that later. Killy, suppose he's right? Suppose there really

is someone else who knows about your factor—someone as dangerous as Croy says?"

"We'll hear from him," said Killilea.

"He won't be as clumsy as I was," said Croy. "I tell you you'll be dead before you know who killed you."

"I guess I'll have to chance it," said Killilea. "You said if you lived you could find him for us. At least you can tell us how, so we can try."

"There would be only one way—to trace him when he calls me. He won't call me after I'm dead."

## VII

**K**ILLILEA watched Croy narrowly. "If you had a chance to catch him now, would you do it?"

"Would I? If I only could!"

"We've killed you," Prue pointed out.

"You did what you could; you were right as far as you knew. And I suppose I have to pay for what I've done . . . I'm not angry at you two."

"All right then. Either you're the cleverest liar or one of the bravest men I've ever met," said Killilea. "Now I'm going to remind you of something. You said that when he ordered you to inject me with the factor, you balked. *You called him back.* Give us that phone number and you've proved your point."

"The phone number," Croy breathed. "It hadn't occurred to me because he always said it was useless to call except in the afternoon; he wouldn't be there at any other time."

"Ever try it?"

"No."

Killilea pointed to the phone. "Try it."

"What shall I say?"

There was a heavy silence. "Get him here."

"He wouldn't come here."

"He would if his whole plan depended on it," said Killilea. "Come on, Croy. You're the boy for intrigue."

Croy put his head in his hands.

"I knew he'd balk," snarled Killilea.

"Shut up," said Croy, startlings. "Let me think."

He crouched there. He covered his eyes, then suddenly raised his head. "Give me the phone."

"Better tell us first what you're going to say."

"Oh, Killy," said Prue, "stop acting like a big bad private detective! Let him do it his way!"

"No," said Killilea. "He's dying, Prue. And if he isn't half-cracked just now, we know he has been. How do we know he isn't going to pull us in the hole after him?"

"Phone him," said Prue evenly.

Croy looked from one to the other, then took the phone from the end table. From his wallet he took a piece of paper and dialed. "You better be right," Killilea whispered to Prue. He went to Croy and took the paper out of his hand and put it in his own pocket. Through the silent room the sound of the ringing signal rasped at them. At the sixth unanswered ring Killilea said, "Even if he's there now—oh, Prue, it might be just a trick . . ."

Croy covered the transmitter. "I haven't time for tricks," he said. And just then the receiver clicked, and a hoarse voice said, "Well?"

Prue gripped Killilea's biceps so hard that he all but grunted. Croy, pale but steady, said, "I'm in trouble."

"It better be bad trouble," said the voice. "I told you not to call me this late."

"It's bad, right enough," said Croy. The reversion to an English accent under strain was quite noticeable. "She took me to her apartment. Killilea was here."

"Alive?"

"I should say so. Alive and very much aware of what's happening. I hit him with the poker."

"Go hit him again."

"I can't—I can't do that. Besides, he told her everything. She knows, now, too."

"Where is she?"

"Tied up. What shall I do?"

A long pause. No one breathed. "I'll come over. Where is it?"

CROY gave the address and apartment number. "And hurry. I don't know how long he'll stay under. Take you long?"

"Fifteen minutes." Click. Croy looked up at them. "Have I got fifteen minutes?" he asked. His face was wet.

Killilea looked at his watch. "How do you feel?"

"Not good."

Killilea went into the bedroom and came out a moment later with a hypodermic in his hand. "Lie down," he said. "Relax. Relax," he said again, touching the side of Croy's neck, "completely. Better." He slid the left sleeve up, squirted a drop of fluid upward from the needle, and buried the gleaming point in the large vein inside the elbow. "Just take it easy until he gets here. You'll last."

"What is it?"

"Adrenalin."

Croy closed his eyes. His lips were slightly cyanotic and his breathing was shallow.

"Are you sure he'll last?" asked Prue. "Sure." Killilea smiled tightly. "Believe him?"

"Mostly, I think."

"Me too. Mostly. We could be making an awful mistake, Prue."

"Mmm. Either way."

He took a turn up and down the room. "Morals and ethics," he said. "You never really know, do you?"

"You do the best you can," she said. "Killy, you do very well indeed."

"Do I?"

"You react ethically much oftener than morally. You react ethically as much as other people do morally."

"What are you thinking about?"

"Killy, you never said a word to me about what I did. With those men, Karl and the Koala. . . ."

"What word should I say?"

She looked at her hands. "You've read books. Insane jealousies and bitterness and distrust. . . ."

"Oh," he said. He thought hard for a moment. "The things you did were . . . just little, unimportant, corroborative details. The big thing was that you had gone. I didn't like your going. But I didn't feel that a part of me was doing those things, which is the feeling jealous people have. You didn't stray when you were with me. You won't when you come back."

"No," she said almost inaudibly. "I won't. But, Killy, that's what I mean when I say you don't react morally. Morals, per se, would have killed what we have together. Ethics—and here it's just another name for our respect for one another—have saved it. Another argument for the higher survival value of ethics."

They sat quietly then, together in the easy chair that was built for one, and were quiet, until Killilea looked at his watch, extricated himself from the chair, and went to Croy.

"It's almost time, Croy," he said evenly. "Go into your act. You feel up to it?"

Croy swung his feet down and shook his head violently. "My face is made of rubber and my heart thinks I'm running the three hundred meter," he said. "I'll make it, though."

"Come on, Prue."

They went into the bedroom, turned out the light, and closed the door until just a finger's breadth of golden light showed from the living room lamp.

They waited.

The doorbell rang. Croy started for the door. "That's downstairs," Killilea murmured. "Push the button in the kitchenette. And don't forget the door here is locked when you try to open it. Speak fairly loud so he will too. I'll take your cues. And Croy, God help you if—"

Prue's hand slid up and covered his mouth. "Good luck, Mr. Croy," she said.

**T**HE buzzer hissed like a snake. Croy drew a deep breath, crossed the room, unlocked the door and opened it. "Where are they?" said a hoarse voice.

"In there," said Croy, "but wait . . . what are you going to do?"

"What do you expect?" said the newcomer. Killilea could see him now—short, heavy, almost chinless; wide forehead, low hairline.

"You're going to kill them," said Croy.

"Do you have a better idea?"

"Have you thought about the details—what happens when the bodies are found, what will the police do?"

The stranger opened his overcoat and from what must have been a special pocket drew out a leather-covered wooden case. He set it on the table, opened it, and took out a hypodermic. He grinned briefly. "Heart failure. So common nowadays."

"Two cases at once?"

"Hmm. You have something there. Well . . . I can take one of them away in my car."

"I was wondering," Croy said tightly, "if you'd expect me to do it."

The man regarded him without expression. "It's a possibility."

"It would mean I'd have to leave here alive. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

The man laughed. "Oh, I see! My dear fellow, you needn't fear for yourself. Aside from considerations of friendship—even admiration—I couldn't possibly complete my plans for the Board without you."

Killilea, his eye fixed to the crack of the door, felt an urgent tugging at his shoulder. Killilea backed away and let her work her way silently around him so that she could see as well.

The man started toward the bedroom. Croy said evenly, "Where have I seen you before?"

The man stopped without turning. The needle glinted in his hand. "I have no idea. I doubt that you ever have."

"I have, though. I have—someplace . . ."

Prue gasped suddenly. Killilea took her shoulders and with one easy motion flung her through the air. She landed on the middle of the bed. The gasp alerted

their visitor who dove for the door. Killilea stepped aside and let it crash open. Light from the living room flooded the man's broad back as he stopped, blinking, in the darkness, peering from one side to the other. Killilea stood up on tiptoe and with all his strength brought the edge of his right hand down on the nape of the man's neck. He went down flat with no sound but his falling, and lay still.

Killilea was gasping as if he had run up steps. He bent and lifted the man's shoulder. It fell back loosely. "Out, all right," said Killilea. "Prue, what got into you? You almost gave us away by making that silly—I'm Prue! What—"

She sat on the edge of the bed, her hands over her face, shuddering. He put his arms around her. "It's Koala," she said. "Oh, Killy, it's Koala . . ."

Croy was standing white-faced in the doorway. "What's she say? What's koala mean?"

"It means a great deal. Turn him over and look at him, Croy. Maybe you'll remember where you saw him."

Croy bent down and rolled the heavy body over. "He's dead!"

Killilea left the bed and ran to Croy, knelt down. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah." He picked up a broken tube of glass, looked at it, laid it down on the carpet. Then he began running his fingers lightly over the front of the man's coat.

"Careful," said Croy.

"Oh, but yes. Here it is." Slowly and cautiously he unbuttoned jacket, vest and shirt. The undershirt showed a small bloodspot, just a drop. From its center extended the needle. Using his handkerchief folded twice, Killilea grasped it and pulled it out. It had penetrated only a fraction of an inch. "Far enough," said Killilea and Croy gave an understanding grunt.

"Heart trouble," said Killilea.

Croy said, "You're still going to have . . . two bodies . . . to explain. And you don't even know who this one is."

"Yes I do," said Killilea. "You do too, if you'll only look at him." He bent close. "Brown-tinted contact lenses," he

said. "I think his eyes are blue. Right, Prue?"

**S**HE gave a long, shuddering sigh. "Yes," she whispered. "And he had a beard to hide that little chin."

"Beard," said Croy, and then dropped to his knees. "*Dr. Pretorio!*"

"It had to be. Now I feel like the boys at that dinner table where Columbus demonstrated how to stand an egg on end."

"But he's . . . he was dead!"

"When we get his coffin dug up—if we bother—we'll find out who really was buried at *Pretorio's* funeral," said Killilea. "If anyone."

"Why?" moaned Croy.

Killilea stood up and dusted off his hands. "Thought a lot of him, didn't you, Croy? Why did he do it? I guess we'll never know in detail. But I'd say his mind snapped. He got afraid of the Board, really his own creation, when he discovered my factor, and wanted it for himself. The Board needed wrecking, and he threw his own supposed death on the wreckage, along with his great reputation. A mind like that, working against society instead of for it, would be happier operating underground. I wonder what he would have done with the factor?"

"He told me last week that the reorganized Board could run the world," said Croy in a small voice. "I thought he was flattering me. I thought it was a figure of speech. Oh, God. *Pretorio*." Tears ran down his face.

"You'll have to give me a hand," said Killilea. "We'll get him down to his car and leave him in it. And that will be that."

"All right . . . do I have time?" asked Croy.

Killilea came to him. "Let's see your tongue. Mmmm-hm!" He lifted Croy's damp wrist and looked thoughtful. "In your condition I'd give you about forty more years."

Croy simply looked at him blankly. Killilea slapped him on the shoulder. "Maybe it's morals, and maybe it's ethics," he said kindly, "but neither Prue nor I could sit and talk while we watched a man die. You got an injection of dilute caffeine citrate to sweat you up, and some adrenalin to make you tingle."

Croy's jaw opened and closed ludicrously. At last he said, "But I'm supposed to . . . I have to pay for . . ."

Killilea laughed. "Listen, philosopher. If you really feel nice and guilty and want to get punished—live with it, don't die for it just so you can escape all those sleepless nights."

Then Croy began to laugh . . .

Together they got the heavy body downstairs while Prue scouted ahead. They saw no one, though they had a drunken-friend story ready. They arranged the corpse carefully behind the wheel and left it.

Back in the foyer of the apartment house, Killilea asked, "Which way do you go?"

"Bilville."

"You can't go all the way out there this late!" Prue cried. "Go back up stairs. You can make yourself quite comfortable there. There's orange juice in the refrigerator, and the clean towels are—"

"But won't you—"

"No," said Killilea flatly, "she won't. I'm taking my wife home."

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# Never Tempt the Devil

By WILLIAM RATIGAN

*There was only one way for Gordon to pay the devil his due*

GORDON MILLER awoke when the alarm clock sounded in his wife's room. He heard her slippers to the bathroom, then rap on his door and tell him sharply to get up. His lips twisted in hopeless revolt. What was the sense in getting up, day after day, week after

week, to the same grinding monotony.

Nevertheless, he got up. Because it was expected of him. Because there was nothing else to do. While shaving a face no longer young but not yet old, he told himself in the mirror:

"You're no worse off than the average,

but you feel worse because you dreamed you were better. Tomorrow was always going to change your luck, and something wonderful would happen. But, like the ordinary rest of the world, you've been trapped in a dull marriage and a dead-end job. There's no way out, nothing ahead except more of the same. This is the Twentieth Century. You can't sell your soul to the devil like Faust."

In ducking his head out the door to answer his wife's impatient announcement that breakfast was getting cold, he nicked himself with the razor. "Oh, hell," he swore. "What's the use? But I'd give twenty years of my life if only—"

The unfinished sentence spoke for itself, voicing universal wishes. If only things were different. If only he had the means to make them so. Twenty years would be such a small price to pay!

As he entered the breakfast nook, his wife brushed loose hair from her eyes and stared at his chin. "How did you manage to cut yourself so funny?"

"Shaving!" he snapped. "And what's so funny about it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe it's my imagination but it looks like a tiny red pitchfork. Like a brand of some kind."

"Nonsense," Gordon Miller said, propping the morning paper behind his plate. A moment later he looked up with a frown. "What's this about an electrical storm creating city-wide damage? It didn't rain yesterday. This paper must be crazy."

"You must be crazy. There's nothing in the paper about a storm."

"No? What do you call this, spread all over the front page?"

"Please, Gordon. It's too early for jokes. I've read the paper. Now, eat your breakfast or you'll be late for work." His wife tightened her faded housecoat. "The only thing about rain is in the weather report, where it says heavy thundershowers are expected late this afternoon."

He had it on the tip of his tongue to make a sarcastic remark about her no doubt denying that the paper gave four

columns and two pictures to the First National Bank holdup, but he stopped himself in time. Because his eyes happened on the dateline that said Thursday the twenty-second. "Isn't this Wednesday the twenty-first?" he inquired uncertainly.

"All day," his wife returned. "Gordon, what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing," he lied. "Listen, Bernice, don't make any cracks. Just look at the date of this paper and read it off to me, will you, please?"

Her glance skimmed the front page. "Wednesday the twenty-first. Shall I go further? Or are you pretty sure about the month and year?"

"Cut the comedy. I asked you to read it. Take a good look."

She did. "I always get the same date. Is that bad?" Her tongue sharpened. "I'm tired of this game. You'd better start for the office. You're hardly the indispensable man around there, you know!"

**O**N THE bus trip downtown, Gordon Miller tried several experiments that, as far as humanly possible, straightened out things in his own mind, although he asked such apparently foolish questions of his fellow passengers that they suspected him of having no mind at all. The phenomenon, first discovered with his wife, could be stated in simple language. Given the same paper that everyone else recognized as this morning's regular edition, he was able to read tomorrow's headlines and news stories under their correct dateline. Privy to reports of events yet unborn, he never doubted their truth. So incredible was the situation that he accepted it calmly and with a minimum of thought, as people accepted the transcendental facts of thermonuclear weapons for fear of going mad with understanding.

Walking from bus stop to office building, he passed the First National Bank Corner. Here, during the noon-hour confusion, ninety thousand dollars would be stolen, a policeman killed, and a bystander wounded—unless he prevented the

happening. Because, of all men alive, only he had a chance.

The knowledge thrilled him with power. From an animal caught in a slow-death trap, he had become a free spirit. Say the word, and fame and fortune were his. He had an uncanny conviction that, to the very end of his days, each morning's paper would put him twenty-four hours ahead of the world.

Only Molly Swinton, the pert receptionist, bothered to greet him as he found his desk in the outer office. "Little late, aren't you, professor?"

"In one respect," he admitted, his smile somewhat sly. "But, by and large, I'm quite a bit ahead of time."

Her laugh said he was crazy but she liked him. "What game are we playing this morning? Or should I say—what book were you reading last night?"

He had been re-reading his favorite play by Kit Marlowe—*The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*. "It's no game this time, it's real," he replied, enjoying the privilege of speaking his mind without running the risk of being believed. "To get out of their private hells, men have sold their souls to the devil. I offered twenty years of my life, and it was accepted."

"I've heard that story in a couple of versions," Molly said, less flippant than usual. "Even in an opera. And most of these Faust characters want to back out of their bargains. Are you sure you can afford to give away twenty years?"

Gordon Miller shrugged and settled at his desk where he pushed his regular work aside and spread out tomorrow morning's news. He decided not to phone the police until about eleven o'clock. That would give them plenty of time to protect the bank. Meanwhile, he studied the day's closing quotations on the stock exchange, and planned a mild killing in Wall Street as a starter.

"What did United Copper close at in your paper?" he called across to Molly.

She flipped pages. "Seventeen." Then he noticed his paper. "Hey, I like that! Asking me to look when you've got the news right in front of you. What's wrong

with your own paper?"

"Not a thing," he sighed contentedly. "Not a single blessed thing!" Spirited buying in the late sessions this afternoon was due to boost United Copper three points and help lay the foundation of his fortune.

**W**HEN Al Quigley, the office athlete, came around to sell cards in the baseball pool, he found a changed customer. "You've belittled my knowledge of the national pastime once too often," Gordon said, consulting his sports section and jotting down final results. "Your baseball pool is kindergarten stuff. Here are the complete boxscores of every game to be played in the major leagues this afternoon. I'll bet fifty cents they're absolutely correct."

Al guffawed at the figures handed him. "Hear the man talk," he marveled in a voice that invited the office force to make fun of his victim. "Yesterday he doesn't know a bunt from a blooper, but now all of a sudden he's Super Fan! And he's willing to risk a whole half dollar to prove it."

The office rewarded Al's performance with giggles and chuckles at Gordon's expense. He accepted the role of goat with good humor. Wait until the ball scores were announced. Instead of taking Al for an expensive ride on a big bet, he was satisfied to settle—for the five o'clock look on the muscular fellow's face.

Until the moment he phoned the police, he made only one slip. "Too bad the Texas Diner burned down during the storm," he told Molly absent-mindedly. "I had half a notion to treat you to lunch there."

Molly swung in her chair. "What storm? Who are you kidding? I passed the diner coming to work." She made a face. "Just to get out of taking me to lunch, you don't have to burn down a restaurant in your imagination." Her eyes slanted at him. "Or are you playing another game?"

"I was confusing the future with the past," Gordon said. "The Texas Diner

won't be struck by lightning until four o'clock this afternoon."

"Crazy," she said. "You're the craziest. It would serve you right if one of your crazy stories really happened, and you were blamed for it."

Gordon smiled and resumed reading his paper. One of the news items haunted him. About three o'clock a suburban family would leave home for a picnic at a nearby lake, taking along an outboard motor boat by trailer. Caught out on the lake in the sudden storm, the whole family would be drowned when the boat overturned. Barring miraculous intervention, a young father and mother, a baby in arms, a boy of seven, and a girl of five, were doomed. Gordon shuddered. The bright promise of an entire family wiped out. It was an unbearable thought.

"Miller!" a voice barked behind him. "I've been standing here for ten minutes watching you read the paper on company time. What's the idea?"

Nervous habit jerked him to attention, but fear of losing his job was now the farthest thing from his mind, and he greeted his employer easily. "Oh, good morning, Mr. Farnsworth. I've been meaning to step into your office. I have a proposition that can't fail to interest you."

"So?" Mr. Farnsworth scowled. "And what about those housing reports that were supposed to be on my desk an hour ago? What have you been doing, besides reading the paper?" His hand pounced on a sheet of scrawled calculations. "What's this? Great Scott! Playing the stock market!"

"That's what I want to talk to you about. You see, sir, I'm in a position to deal in futures. I have what amounts to advance tips on the market. If you'd care to join me in an investment partnership, supplying the initial capital—"

"Miller, have you gone raving mad?" Mr. Farnsworth turned on his heel. "If this is your idea of a joke," he added ominously, "you'd better explain the point of it to my satisfaction before the day is over."

When the door closed on his militant figure, the outer office darted glances and buzzed with comment. "You've got unemployment insurance, Gordie?" Al Quigley inquired with an unpleasant grin. But his target was barricaded behind the paper.

AT ELEVEN o'clock he dialed police headquarters. "This is Gordon Miller of Industrial Research. I want to report a holdup. At the First National Bank. When? In an hour from now. Yes, that's what I said. No, I'm not drunk or crazy. It's going to be held up at two minutes past twelve by three armed men in rubber skin-masks who will escape with ninety thousand dollars after killing a policeman and wounding a bystander. How do I know no much in advance? Because I read it in the paper!" He yelled the truth in a sarcastic tone and slammed the receiver.

Molly was looking at him with an odd expression. She ducked around in her chair when she noticed his glance. As if she wanted to avoid his eyes.

Several minutes later his outside phone rang. It was police headquarters in a routine check. A bored voice asked a string of skeptical questions. Finally he became impatient. "Listen. I could have made an anonymous call and saved myself this third degree. But I wanted you to realize the information was on the level. So you'd get moving and prevent the holdup. I'm sorry I can't explain how I know what's going to happen. But that's no excuse for you to advise me to sleep it off or consult a psychiatrist. Remember what Hamlet told Horatio: *There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy!*"

This time, after he hung up, Molly had her back to him. The tips of her pretty ears were bright pink from listening. He sensed the confusion of her thoughts and his heart reached out for hers in a psychic plea for understanding.

Shortly before noon he was summoned into Mr. Farnsworth's office. "Miller," his grim employer demanded, "what's got

into you? What made you give the police that wild story about a holdup? Don't they get enough crank calls without your devilment? You must be out of your mind. Didn't you even stop to realize that you couldn't know such things without being part of the holdup gang? You'd be in jail now if it weren't for me. I convinced headquarters you were harmless, said your conduct must be the result of overwork and nervous strain."

Gordon set his lips and went to the window. Twelve stories below, on the corner, people were scurrying in and out of the First National Bank. He shot a glance at his employer's wall clock. Three minutes before noon. Too late now. In a fatalistic mood he awaited the inevitable.

"I hate to say this, Miller," Mr. Farnsworth continued, "but you've always been too much of a visionary to suit me. There's no place in the business world for dreamers. You've been getting more erratic every day. This last trick of yours is the finish. You'd be turning in false alarms next. Clear out your desk. The cashier has orders to give you an extra two weeks salary."

Gordon nodded indifferently and returned to the outer office. He passed his desk and headed for the window that commanded the best view of the bank corner. Noon sounded and lunch-bound pedestrians poured into the street. Traffic snarled. A black sedan double-parked in front of the bank.

"What are you looking for, pal?" Al Quigley cracked. "Your missing buttons?"

"Don't miss the afternoon ball scores," Gordon said, not taking his eyes from the bank corner. Incredibly soon, three men ran out of the bank, shooting as they came. The passing crowd scattered wildly from the line of fire. As the bandits piled into the black sedan, a cop knelt on the sidewalk for steadier aim. The puffs of smoke from his gun brought answering puffs from the sedan's windows. He sagged forward. Behind him a woman shopper also fell, her packages spilling on the pavement. The black sedan ripped

around the corner and was gone. A siren wailed, then another.

**G**ORDON jumped as a half-smothered scream sounded almost in his ear. He turned to find Molly Swinton, her hand covering her mouth and her eyes wide with shock, backing slowly away from him. At the same moment he saw Mr. Farnsworth appear in his doorway, beckon Al Quigley, and address him in tense whispers. Then the two large men, their faces tight, began a wary advance.

"Don't take any chances, Quigley," Mr. Farnsworth said as they closed in. "He's not responsible. Get out of harm's way, Miss Swinton!"

In the background the switchboard girl took an incoming call that made her gasp. "The police!" she cried. "Mr. Farnsworth! The police—"

Molly, pale as a flower, whirled to face Gordon. Her eyes were troubled and undecided but her lips silently shaped, "Run, run, run!"

As she blocked Mr. Farnsworth's path, Gordon ran, shoving over the water-cooler to trip Al Quigley and send him sprawling in broken glass. He fled out the door past the elevators and down the stairs at breakneck speed, tearing off his suit coat and tie on the way, altering his appearance as far as possible from the typical office worker. He reached the main floor in his shirt sleeves, slipped outside, and lost himself in an excited mob as more sirens wailed toward the scene.

Two hours later, on the other side of the city, he walked into a bar in time to hear most of the on-the-hour news report. Dressed in newly purchased coveralls and a giveaway painter's cap, he had gotten a short haircut that changed the shape of his face and made him look younger. He ordered a beer and listened to the description of himself that was coming over the radio.

"Police are also on the lookout for Gordon Miller, a middle-aged office worker for a research firm located in the building next to the ill-fated bank. He is said to be mentally unbalanced, per-

haps a homicidal maniac, and himself furnished the police with proof that he belonged to the holdup gang. When last seen, Miller, a slender man of medium height with brown hair and blue eyes, was wearing a grey business suit—”

The bartender turned down the radio. “I hope they get that bird quick,” he remarked. “I don’t like the idea of a nut running around loose. Not that I’m really worried. This killer’s a dead duck both ways from the middle. In the first place he’s crazy, so they won’t stop to reason with him. In the second place, a cop got killed in that holdup, so they’ll all be trigger-happy.”

“I believe you,” Gordon said soberly. “Is there a morning paper around?”

“Pretty stale news by now,” the bartender said, handing him a copy from under the bar. “Nothing gets staler quicker than news, except beer.”

“Oh, this news isn’t all stale yet,” Gordon observed thoughtlessly. “There’s the storm and—” He bit off the words in sudden realization of his error.

“What storm? What are you talking about?”

“Skip it. I was thinking of something else.”

“Don’t we all?” the bartender said, his eyes shifting. “Say, you want to play the ponies, we got a plush joint out back. Maybe you’d win a few bucks.”

“Not a bad idea,” Gordon replied, turning to the day’s racing results as they appeared in tomorrow’s news. His chances of playing the stock market were gone, at least for the present, and he needed money until he could square himself somehow with the police. “Not a bad idea at all,” he repeated. “I’ve got to run an errand first, but I’ll be back to pick the winners.”

ON THE way to his destination in the suburban bus, he frowned at the paper he had borrowed. Since it showed tomorrow’s news to him, why didn’t the holdup story contain his name, possibly his picture? The apparent discrepancy could be explained, of course, although it was ridiculous to demand logical per-

fection in a case that defied the normal logic of time and events. But was the omission of himself from the story a sign that the course of history, until the irrevocable final moment, could be turned this way or that? Perhaps he had never had a chance of preventing the holdup—although the affirmative could be argued strongly—but he had had a choice of trying, or not trying, to prevent it. If he had chosen not to try, the outcome would have remained as it had originally appeared to him, but, since he had chosen to try, his connection with the event would have to be recorded in tomorrow’s regular edition. This line of thought gave him hope that he might have a chance to succeed in his second attempt to change the news.

Nervously he kept checking the address in the paper. At Valley View Drive he hurried from the bus. It was almost three o’clock. He sprinted the last two blocks, turned a corner, and breathed his relief at sight of the car parked in front of a modest ranch style home. A husky young man was bolting the attachment of the trailer that held an outboard motorboat. Down the walk in a sunsuit that showed off her attractive legs, came a young woman with a baby in the crook of one arm and a picnic basket in the other. From the rear window of the car a youngster was pretending to fish with a bamboo pole. Beside him his sister was putting a bonnet on her doll, scolding in a motherly tone.

Gordon Miller knew their names by heart. James and Mary Sewell. Jimmy Junior and Sally Lou. Baby Steve. Full of love for one another, they radiated health and happiness. They had everything to live for.

As Mary Sewell slipped into the front seat with Baby Steve, Gordon approached the head of the family. “I don’t know how to say this. You’ll think I’m crazy. But don’t take your family out in the boat. There’s a storm coming. You’ll all be drowned.”

James Sewell stared in blank amazement. “If this is a gag, I don’t get it. Who are you? What’s the pitch? You

drunk or something?"

"Hurry up, darling," Mary Sewell called. "What does the man want?"

"Search me, just some crackpot." Her husband turned to get in the car. "Hey, take your hands off me! You off your rocker?"

"Maybe he's that lunatic they're talking about on the radio," his wife said in sudden fright. "Push him away, honey. Let's get out of here."

Jimmy Junior and Sally Lou whimpered as they saw a strange man struggling with their father. Baby Steve caught the uneasiness and began to howl.

Gordon was desperate. "For heaven's sake, listen to me!" he urged in fierce appeal. "You can't go, I won't let you go!"

"I warned you," James Sewell grunted almost pityingly, bringing up his fist. The blow caught Gordon low on the jaw and knocked him to the lawn. A motor roared. Too late he staggered to his feet. Then he stumbled foolishly after the car until it was out of sight. Retracing his steps he found a card in the road. It pictured a small boy blowing out the pink candles on an enormous cake, and it contained an invitation to attend Jimmy Junior's birthday party on the coming Saturday.

Gordon tore up the card. A gust of wind from the northwest whipped the pieces apart forever. On the horizon black clouds were crowding.

AT THE height of the storm, he returned to the place that was a combination bar and bookie joint. "Look what the wind blew in," the bartender greeted him. "Say, you look like lightning hit you."

"I've felt better in my life," Gordon admitted bleakly. "Double bourbon."

"Sure." The bartender poured the shots and swabbed the counter. "You know, it's funny about you mentioning a storm in the paper, when there wasn't any, and then *wham!* here's the worst of the year." His eyes shifted. "Almost five, and time for the California ponies to be galloping. Try your luck?"

On his way to the back room, Gordon stopped at the phone booth and dialed Molly Swinton's private line at the office. "Is it safe for you to talk to me?"

"I think so. Oh, Gordon, are you all right? I've been so worried, I—Gordon, the radio just gave a bulletin about the Texas Diner burning down, and Al Quigley almost had a stroke when the baseball scores were announced. He says you must be in league with the devil. Gordon, I don't understand how—"

The way she spoke his name told him everything he wanted to know. "Don't try to understand," he broke in. "Understanding isn't so important. Too many people are trying to understand too many things in this world. In the past several hours I've learned how useless, and how dangerous, a little knowledge can be. The human race has developed its head at the expense of its heart, and traded the cold finality of science for the unlimited wonder of immortal dreams." He paused, embarrassed at his impassioned outburst. "Well, I just wanted to hear your voice, Molly."

"I'm so frightened for you, Gordon. They all think you're a maniac. They'll shoot on sight. Tell me what I can do to help. Anything!"

"I want you to stay out of this. You hear! You're not to run any risks for me. Wait until the bandits are caught or I can clear my skirts with the police some way."

He said good-by and hung up gently on her protests. Then he deposited another coin and dialed home. He could have spared himself the duty call. Bernice played the role of outraged wife who had suspected him of the worst for some time. When he protested his innocence, she laughed harshly. Her thoughts were of herself alone. "How do you think I feel?" she demanded. "Married to a hunted criminal!"

Leaving the phone booth with a bad taste in his mouth, he entered the bookie establishment at the rear of the barroom. It was blue with tobacco smoke and jammed with customers. A battery of phones kept ringing and attendants were

busy at the blackboards chalking up the latest results from the western tracks. A stout baldheaded man, wearing a green eyeshade and answering to the name Luke, seemed to be in charge. He handled the money, and called out the betting odds.

There was an evening paper at the table where Gordon sat, and it settled a question that had been in his mind all day. The front page showed him the regular daily news, nothing in advance. It also displayed his picture—a good likeness taken for Industrial research files—as a suspected member of the holdup gang. He looked around self-consciously and pulled the painter's cap down to cover his face.

But the betting fever caught him. Checking the racing results in his preview of tomorrow's news, he picked a winner that would run at ten-to-one odds, and bet five dollars on the nose. As soon as the horse romped home, he put his winnings on another. The third time he went up to collect his bets, the baldheaded man in the green eyeshade gave him a sharp stare. "Can't lose, huh, Jack?"

"That's the honest truth," Gordon said. "I simply can't lose."

THE feel of the money, and the growing respect of the crowd for his uncanny judgment, went to his head. He kept the bets small, but he could not resist displaying his virtuosity by picking winners at every track, and, in one instance, selecting the win, place, and show horses in the same race.

As suppertime passed and the crowd thinned out, he placed his bets on the final races. The bartender poked his head through the door and exchanged a glance with the baldheaded man. A prickling of danger rippled at the nape of Gordon's neck. He forced himself to rise calmly and move forward to collect his last winnings.

"All right, boys," the baldheaded man told the rest of the room. "Let's lock it up for tonight!" He and the bartender contrived to arrange themselves on either

side of Gordon, and hustled him roughly but unobtrusively into an adjoining office.

"I spotted him for a freak from the first," the bartender growled. "A painter's cap and clean fingernails, they don't go together. Then the crazy way he cracks about the storm. So I'm not surprised to see his face on the front page."

"You got to have bells in your head to pick winners like this joker," the baldheaded man said. "But I can't figure him in the bank stickup. Did he get sore at his pals and try to queer their play or is he just plain bats?"

"Never mind the post mortem," Gordon said wearily. "Call the police and end this."

"The police?" the baldheaded man echoed, his eyes strange under the green shade. "We're not informers, Jack. We're businessmen. All we want is our money back. We feel that you misrepresented yourself and caused us unnecessary mental anguish."

After emptying his pockets and dusting his coveralls with their fists, the two of them heaved him into the alley. Aching to the bone but grateful for his freedom, he hobbled to a main street through the gathering dusk. A corner drugstore clock pointed to eight-thirty. He went inside and closeted himself in a phone booth. His watch pocket yielded fifteen cents. He deposited the nickel, and dashed home.

"Listen, Bernice, you've got to help me. I'll never ask you for another favor. Just this once. I need money. Not much. If you could leave a couple dollars—"

"Wait a minute, Gordon. Excuse me. Hold the phone, will you?"

Trusting her, never doubting her, he held the phone. Finally, he said: "Hello, hello, Bernice!" But there was no answer. Only a kind of listening silence. Then the ugly truth became clear. His wife had betrayed him. The call was being traced. Perhaps the police already were speeding toward this phone address.

In his haste Gordon left the receiver swinging from the hook. He felt eyes burning into his back as he ran from the

drug store. Was it merely his imagination or was that the siren of a prowler fading in from the distance? As he fled along the street, he felt the night closing around him, night and a darker fear. His feet seemed to be caught in the slow-motion gait of a deep-sea diver. His whole flight took on the terror of a falling dream.

**S**UDDENLY he realized. He was mortally afraid, not of what he was running away from, but of what he was running toward. And his fear was not for himself alone but for the entire race of men.

Up ahead a newsboy already was singing out his morning papers. "Bank bandits still at large! Storm causes statewide damage!"

Gordon Miller exchanged his last coin for a paper, and, by yellow lamplight, read the headlines that for him were twenty-four hours in advance of time. One look filled his face with horror. Headless of traffic he dashed across the street to a cigar store and commandeered the counter phone. "Long distance! Washington!"

Gordon waved his paper. "They've got to believe me now! This is their last chance! Enemy aircraft armed with new thermonuclear weapons already must be over the Polar Cap. Unless something

happens to prevent, this is the only major city in the United States that won't be smashed!"

The little proprietor stared from the wilderness on Gordon's face to the picture in the paper. He turned and bolted through the door. Along the street the whine of a prowler's siren grew louder.

"The War Department or the White House!" Gordon said. "Hurry, operator, there's not much time!"

The siren wailed to the curb. Through the plate glass window Gordon could see the cigar store proprietor talking and gesticulating excitedly to the policemen, pointing to the front-page picture. One of the officers started for the rear of the building. The other advanced cautiously through the door, gun ready.

Gordon whirled from the counter, phone in hand, outstretching the other in a gesture of appeal that was misunderstood. "Listen!" he said in frantic haste. "You've got to believe me or—"

The policeman was taking no chances. He fired twice.

Gordon Miller's hand clawed at the paper as he fell. For a moment he wondered why the terrible headlines were fading to leave only blank newsprint.

Then he knew.

For him there would be no tomorrow. The devil was collecting his due.



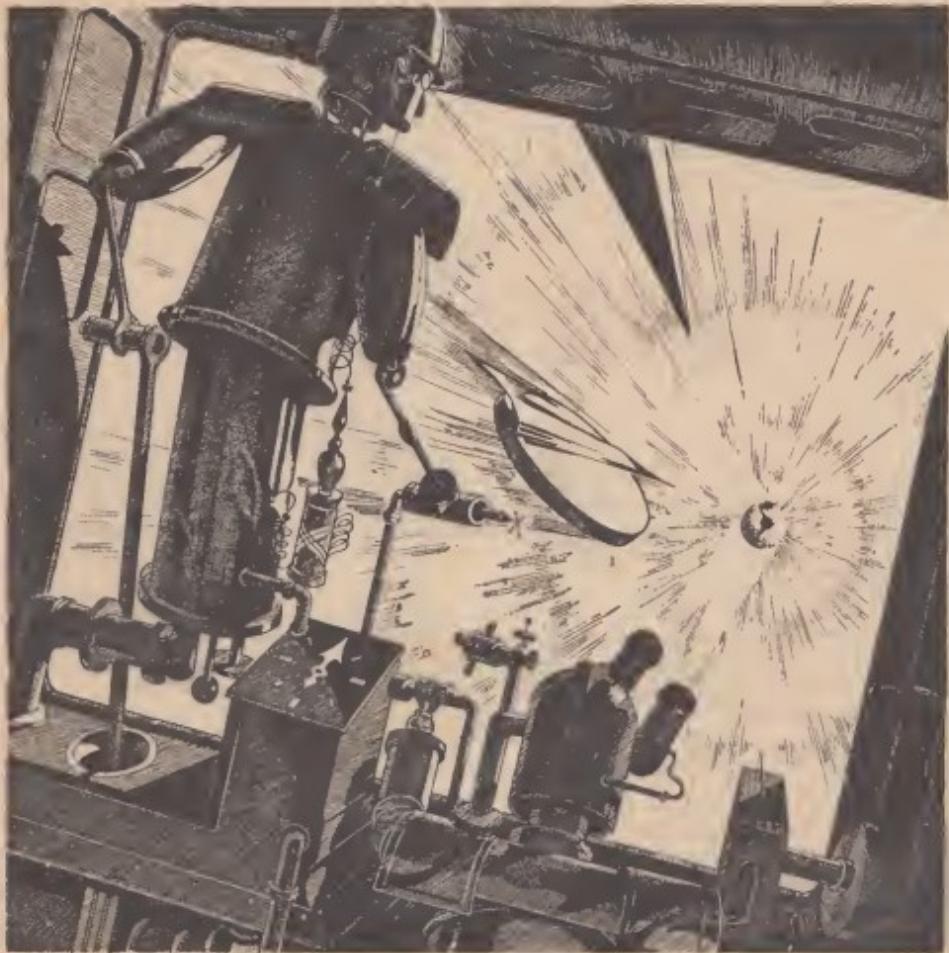
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# The Last Spring

By **GEORGE H.  
SMITH**

*Earth sent her refugees into space, with a host of alien robots for their guides. . . .*

**N**O ONE who saw it will ever forget the first flare-up. A huge sheet of flame towered out from the sun and for three days hung there like a river out of Hell. Almost at once the heat became all but unbearable.

One or two military spokesmen suggested that the flame might possibly be an optical illusion caused by refraction in air levels of different temperatures, but their hearts weren't really in it.

That last spring had started like the millions of other springs since the world began, but now as I re-

member back across the years, it seems to have been just a little more perfect than any other spring. The air was fresher, the flowers brighter, and the girls, I am sure, were prettier. There is a special poignancy about remembered things as you grow older, but nothing lingers in my mind so strongly as that last spring.

There had been the usual Saturday afternoon dances at the Country Club and picnicking out at the lake. The youngsters from the high school gathered at Gerard's and the men talked about crops as men have done since Cain and Abel. On the high school faculty, our lives had run a little smoother and perhaps a little slower than in the rest of the town.

As I remember it, we held an Americanism essay contest with a wristwatch donated by Mrs. Melville-Tomkins as first prize. Old John Kewitt and I represented the Science Department on the judging committee. The contest was won by Arturo Gonzales but he didn't get the wristwatch because Mrs. Melville-Tomkins objected.

"Of course, I am not prejudiced," she informed the committee, "but we must keep in mind that America was not founded by people of mongrel blood. How could such a boy really understand Americanism?"

"This is still a white man's country!" shouted Ben Spaulding. Ben was head of the Patriot Veterans and people listened when Ben shouted or the P.V.'s made things uncomfortable for them. And Mrs. Melville-Tomkins wasn't only a past president of the First Daughters of America but also the most influential member of the School Board. My colleagues and I took council with each other and our consciences and discovered that John Brounly had really won the contest or at any rate was more racially acceptable.

The lovely spring weather continued through March and into April. With April came the flying saucers as they had every spring for the last twenty years. A Japanese astronomer reported an un-

usually large sunspot moving across the face of Sol, but the people of our town and our world were more interested in international than in stellar affairs. General of the Armies, Ardmore, issued a statement to Congress calling for better flying radar posts at the North Pole. On TV, his mellifluous voice vibrated with emotion when he spoke of America's destiny; her place in the sun.

IN OUR town we enjoyed the warm spring weather until it began to get too warm. We had a watermelon festival and talked politics. In Germany, Fritz Thigbur, Fuehrer of the Fifth Reich, reviewed five divisions of armored storm troops and shouted into a hundred million pairs of Teuton ears a demand that Germany be given living room. In China, Generalissimo Tuo Min inspected rocket launching sites and called on his people to stand ready to seize for themselves a place in the sun.

The flying saucers, as if realizing once and for all that they were only optical illusions, disappeared early that year. A Harvard astronomer called attention to the unusual number and size of prominences to be seen on the sun, but the radio commentators called attention to Yakov Tigamoff. The Russian dictator in his latest speech had raged at America for standing between Russia and its place in the sun. All over the world the news analysts told us that the great rocket firing stations were at the alert; the warheads were in, the targets picked and the well manicured fingers of the generals, the colonels, the majors and the captains were poised over the shiny push-buttons—waiting.

The cold war was getting hot and so was the weather. It was just a few days before the first flare-up that I stood with John Kewitt in the school cafeteria line.

"Have you seen any more in the papers about that big sunspot the Japanese astronomer reported?" he asked.

I mopped my forehead with a handkerchief already soaked, and said, "Nothing since that first story. Why?"

"You get so little news these days,"

he said wearily as we found seats and dove into our mealburger steaks, "Have you been keeping up with your professional journals?"

I stopped with a bite halfway to my mouth. "No . . . no . . . I haven't. What are you getting at?"

Kewitt looked around carefully and then leaned forward. "Of course I believe in the neo-ptolemaic theory, but the old astronomy used to call our sun a G-type star."

"Yes, I know about the old ideas; they have been discredited for fifteen years. And you know as well as I do that our teacher's oath forbids us to discuss this sort of thing."

"Come now, Bob, I haven't said anything disloyal. There are still quite a few unjailed scientists who believe that the Earth circles around the sun."

"Unjailed, perhaps, but out of jobs. What about this G-type star business?" I asked trying to remember what the books had said about it before the books had been changed to conform to political and religious reality.

"Well, under the old theories of the Universe—before General Ardmore and the Fundamentalists said otherwise—a lot of scientists believed that the sun was just one of a great many suns—the stars, you know." He laughed apologetically. "It's silly, of course, but they believed that some of those stars, the G-types especially, blew up from time to time—novas they called them."

"Yes?" The warm perspiration that had been dripping down the back of my neck had suddenly turned cold.

"Well, there have been hints, nothing definite, mind you, but hints in some of the technical journals that our sun has been acting very strangely. Of course Morale Security wouldn't let them mention nova but that's what they have on their minds."

With difficulty I got down a lump of mealburger. "Now look here, John, you and I know that the Good Book says that the sun is just a small round ball of heat and energy that circles around the earth like the moon and stars do. Despite what

they used to teach us in college before things changed, John, you know that this must be true because, John, General Ardmore and the Security Police agree with the Good Book."

The fact that the Dean of Loyalty had come into the cafeteria while we were talking had made it easier for me to scoff at Kewitt's talk, but not to forget what he had said. It was five days later that the first flare-up filled the sky, and, after briefly horrifying the world, settled back into the sun.

**A**PRIl became May and things got back to normal, more or less. The price of mealburger went to two dollars a pound and Samuel Sopworth, president of the P.V.'s, said we ought to remember what a fine man General Ardmore was.

With May it began to get hot, really hot. Day after day the temperature rose. The blazing sun dispelled clouds and fogs every morning as superheated days followed humid nights. Rome reported the mercury at one hundred degrees for twenty days in a row; London was in the upper nineties. In our town, the lawns turned brown and died, shrubs drooped and flowers faded. There were water shortages in Los Angeles and New York, but the occasional mention of sunspots disappeared from the newspapers.

A week went by with still searing but slightly cooler weather and apprehension faded slightly. General Ardmore even had time to get back to supervise the testing of a new helium bomb. The papers talked about the sheet of flame which Earth was sending forth in reply to that of Sol. I had time to get back to teaching the neo-ptolemaic theory to our young minds but I greatly fear that much of their faith had been shaken in the new science. Not that they didn't believe that the sun circled around the earth; the Army said it did and that automatically made it so.

"Bob! Bob, come outside!" It was Kewitt at the door of my classroom, his face distorted with fear. Dropping the astronomy book, I followed him out at a

run and then stood staring upward, unable to speak. The sun was a huge mass of red in the sky—a bulging, misshapen, pulsating mass. People were swarming into the streets, screaming in terror. Some had fallen on their faces and were praying. Kewitt's hand tightened on my shoulder, "I think nature has grown tired of man and his ways. It won't be long now."

For a few days the world almost went mad and then the iron hand of military control clamped down more tightly than ever. An uneasy quiet settled upon us; people used to believing what they were told to believe thought that that great ugly mass of red in the sky was only temporary. Astronomers used to saying what they were told to say announced that this was only a change in the sun's structure and would soon pass away. Then all would be normal again. It was intimated that it would be considered Un-Loyal to believe otherwise. Thousands died of heat prostration and other thousands died from lack of water, but still more thousands were arrested for spreading rumors and unrest.

ONE more week passed, and with storms and fires taking a huge toll security regulations were strained to the utmost to hold down a worldwide surge of terror. Hour after hour and day after day the radio and TV poured forth soothing platitudes.

"Why," I demanded of Kewitt, "don't the scientists tell the people the truth?"

"Security!" he spat out, "Security! Already I suspect the military is convinced that this is a Russian trick. The Russians themselves are saying it's a capitalist plot."

"You'd think that some man of courage would rise up. After all, in the face of universal destruction, what difference does it make whether you die by a firing squad or when Sol lets loose?"

"Perhaps, perhaps, but a few extra days or weeks of life are precious when that is all you have left."

"They're all cowards!"

The next day the Patriot Veterans and

the First American Daughters organized a Loyalty and Faith Meeting; as head of the high school Science Department, I was asked to speak. I remember that my speech began:

"As we all know, ladies and gentlemen, according to the now generally accepted neo-ptolemaic theory, the sun is a small globe of heat and energy which circles Earth daily. The utterly fantastic theories held in the past about its size and structure have been of late proven untrue."

I ended on a reassuring note. "Extremely hot weather as you may have noticed causes many strange optical effects. I can assure you that the strange phenomenon we are witnessing in our sky that makes the sun appear so large is merely one of those effects."

My address was called by our local paper one of the most loyal delivered on the subject and even Ben Spaulding himself had a word to say about it. "You know, Prof, I wasn't sure you really believed that stuff you hand out in school until last night. You really do believe it, don't you?" He looked nervously over his shoulder to where the fantastically misshapen sun was sinking behind the hills.

"Why, Mr. Spaulding, to believe otherwise would be Un-Loyal!"

"Well, 'man of courage,'" Old Kewitt snorted at me, "'What difference does it make if you die tomorrow or three weeks from now?'"

"You are right," I said. "It does make a difference. I have a wife and children. You have no family; you're an old man. Why don't you . . ."

"I'm a coward, too, just like the rest of you."

THE radio and TV sets kept at us all week, ignoring the menace overhead, building up the foreign menace. There were riots, they said, outside the Russian Embassy; stones had been thrown at the German consulate. The American people were aroused by recent insults and were yelling for revenge.

"Yelling for revenge? The big boys

## STARTLING STORIES

have the right idea—keep the people stirred up. Feed them war and they'll forget about the sun. Maybe it will go away!" Kewitt's laugh was an almost hysterical cackle.

One night the radio told us that General Ardmore would speak to the nation on TV the following evening.

That night stands out clearly from among the other blazing nights of that last spring. The general had hardly begun when we received the first radio message from the Rescue Expedition. Every window was open along our street and from each house you could hear the blaring TV sets, the clear, roundly modulated tones of a dozen General Ardmores blending into a medley of sound that hushed everything else.

"Fellow citizens, fellow soldiers in the cause of Americanism . . ." he had just begun when a loud buzzy noise overwhelmed his voice and was followed by a few moments of complete silence. Then a voice . . .

*"Attention! Attention, People of Earth! Attention! Do Not Be Alarmed. This Is the Galactic Confederacy Rescue Service Calling the People of Earth. This Voice Is Speaking From the Flagship of a Space Fleet That Is Now Approaching Your Planet. This Fleet Has Been Sent to Rescue You From Destruction. You Have Only a Few Weeks' Time. Attention People of Earth! Attention! We Are Aiming These Hyperwave Transmissions to Every Nation and Section of Your Planet in its Own Language. There is Very Little Time. Please Stand By for Evacuation. Your Sun is Reaching Its Nova Stage."*

For a short time the Earth's leaders considered resistance to the evacuation, considered denying that there was any real danger. The papers talked of hoaxes and mentioned plots, but when the ships came, mankind for once in its bloody history was completely overawed. The size and number of the ships was almost unbelievable. The world watched and waited as they swung into orbits like pencil-shaped moons and launched thousands upon thousands of disc-shaped tenders

that looked exactly like the observation craft that had haunted our skies for years.

As the tenders landed, the fear that had swept the world boiled out of hand and millions fled toward the landing stations. No one paused to wonder at these aliens who were offering themselves as our saviors—not with the ever present terror of that abysmal horror, the sun.

Carefully the tenders settled to the ground and the radios began to blare forth an intricately thought out plan for mankind's migration to what our researchers referred to as "prepared worlds." Every city, every town, village and section of farm country was assigned a date and time group when it must be ready for evacuation. People were to take with them only their "most prized possessions." The dates ran to June tenth, which the radio commentators took to calling N-Day Minus One. The scientists of the Galactic Confederacy had set June eleventh as the day on which all life must have been evacuated from Earth.

Something almost like calm settled over Earth as the world's leaders agreed to all instructions of the Galactic people, or rather to the instructions of their representatives. We soon learned that the space fleet was manned only by robots, robots created especially for this service.

IN AN open field on the outskirts of our town, the two-mile-round saucer sat. On June fifth it would make four trips to a designated hatchway of a designated spaceship and there unload. Already the townspeople had begun to gather, arriving in loaded cars and trucks to camp out in the fields about the grounded tender.

The boiling days and nights were spent in preparation. Kewitt and I crated the scientific equipment of the school and aided in collecting books from the student library. The City Council had the big equestrian statue of Colonel Dan Braden, our Civil War hero, taken down from its place in front of the City Hall and trucked out to the loading spot. Howard Mallory's barber pole and two chairs followed in the next truck. Everybody

laughed when Jim Hyde put a big sign in his hardware store window which read: TEMPORARILY CLOSED BECAUSE OF END OF WORLD. WILL BE OPEN FIRST DAY ON NEW WORLD.

We all got immunization shots and were assigned quarters on the ship we were to board. We packed our belongings and moved out to camp in the fields with the other people.

Kewitt had struck up something of an acquaintance with the robot who manned our tender and we were surprised to learn from him that the Galactic Confederacy had known for twenty-five years that Sol was scheduled to nova—that was why their observation of our planet had been so intensive.

"Well, well," muttered Kewitt, "You've known for so long. Tell me, then, why did you wait until the last moment to launch this rescue?"

The robot, who called himself O4R9, allowed the little red lights that served him as eyes to twinkle somewhat as he answered.

"I'm afraid the beings of the Confederacy do not understand the people of Earth very well. They could not conceive of reasoning beings destroying each other as you do in your wars. It was with the greatest difficulty that their observers could believe that Terrans were intelligent creatures."

The owner of the television store in the county seat was trying to sell out his stock before leaving.

"Can't tell what kind of TV reception you can get in those galaxy places," he confided to me.

As an advertisement, he set up a big screen beside the saucer where several hundred people could watch. Night and day the screen was lit up as the great migration began and we watched with whatever patience we could muster. We saw the silvery ships moving in their orbits as the stream of tenders mounted upward toward them. We watched as New York emptied and its teeming millions filled up the assigned ships. We saw cowhands herding great masses of cat-

tle toward waiting ships and we saw scattered bands of shepherds making their way down from the hills under the blazing red orb of a sun that was beginning to develop a bulge on one side.

The Louvre was stripped of its treasures and Fort Knox of its gold before our eyes. Afabs riding through the desert nights passed before the busy cameras as they hurried toward their assembly points. Everywhere the omnipresent observation discs hung, broadcasting orders, carrying the news to outlying districts and even rounding up stray children.

Destructive windstorms were still sweeping across the earth seemingly in answer to giant fire storms which raged across the sun's face. But the evacuation didn't slow down.

DAY and night the people of our town hung about the TV screen as if afraid to let go of this last link with the familiar pattern of their lives. News . . . news . . . news . . . and the huckster's pitch poured out at us.

Peppo, Bubble, Bubbles!  
Peppo, Bubble, Bubbles!  
Peppo Bubbles Beats Them All!

"Did you know, folks, that there will be a Peppo Bubble cold drink machine in every commissary on your rescue ship? By special arrangement with the Galactic Rescue Service, these wonderfully refreshing drinks will be available to everyone at all times during the trip."

And more:

"Miss Ruth Del Mar, glamorous Hollywood star, arrived in Palm Springs today where her studio is shooting the last scenes of its epic picture *Worlds May End*. Miss Del Mar, it is rumored, will fly to Las Vegas in a few days to shed husband number three before she goes on board her assigned rescue ship. Miss Del Mar confided to your reporter that although she and her husband are still friends they don't want to take chances on what the divorce laws might be on a new planet."

"Professor John Mitchell of Hayden Planetarium explained tonight the slight

discrepancy that the recent landings of extra-terrestrial spaceships on Earth have brought to light in the Neo-Ptolemaic theory."

A billboard was erected near the departure center.

**STARS MAY BLOW UP  
WORLDS MAY END  
SECURITY INSURANCE  
COMPANY IS AS SOLID  
AS PIKE'S PEAK**

And another commentator on TV:

"The government of Great Britain protested today against the decision of the Galactic representatives that the liner Queen Elizabeth III is too large to be loaded aboard a spaceship."

And in skywriting the following:

**DON'T BE CAUGHT SHORT ON  
THE TRIP. BORROW FROM YOUR  
FRIENDLY DAYS LOAN COM-  
PANY. PAY WHEN YOU GET TO  
NEW WORLD.**

A new story in the *Herald-Times* of June third:

"The government of Russia demands that it receive a planet of its own—no American capitalists wanted—the Galaxy must learn economic realities, announces *Pravda*."

Hand bills were passed out:

**DON'T FORGET, FOLKS, WITH  
THE MOVE INTO SPACE, MARTIN  
TRICARS WILL BE UNDERGOING  
A GREAT EXPANSION TO TAKE  
CARE OF MILLIONS OF NEW  
CUSTOMERS THAT WILL BE  
FOUND IN THE NEW TERRITORIES.  
IT IS POSSIBLE THAT YOU  
WONT BE ABLE TO GET A NEW  
MODEL AS SOON AS YOU WANT  
ONE.**

From the TV news came a foreign language announcement: "The German leader announced today that if Germany is not given enough living space, it will take it."

"There will always be a Texas!" declared Governor Johns, "What I want to know is—is there enough room in this Galactic settlement for Texas?"

"We are now a strong people," the Generalissimo said, "We will take what

we need from weaker people."

"By the way, 04," I said during a few minutes break in the stream of TV, "I presume that an organization of the size and importance of the Confederacy has a very strong military force."

"I know of none. The Galaxy has lived at peace for as far back as records or racial memory goes."

I looked at Kewitt and we both turned back to look at the TV screen.

"What will be the effect of the migration on the sports world? The head coach of Princeton University has stated that the temporary suspension of spring football practice will be felt when his team plays its first game of the season against Columbia."

**A**S OUR turn drew near there was some restlessness among the people of our town. I remember that I was standing near the TV screen watching the patient faces of Asia's millions as they climbed aboard hundreds of waiting saucers when Mrs. Melville-Tomkins approached O4R9. She was full of dignity and had Ben Spaulding along to back her up as she demanded:

"You don't really expect people like me to travel in ships with people like that?" She waved a bejeweled hand at the video screen.

O4 sat strangely immobile for a moment, his lights blinked once and then he said, "Of course not, madam. Our orders were to be very careful of all the mores of the Earth peoples. There are many others who wish special treatment. We have special ships; we have arranged for a certain amount of segregation."

"Well, I'm glad! I didn't know if you people understood the way we feel about that sort of thing."

"Oh you forget, Mrs. Melville-Tomkins, that we robots who are in charge of this operation were created especially to understand the human race. We have made all plans accordingly."

Ben Spaulding stuck his pasty face close up to O4's three blinking lights. "You better have!" he snarled, "This is

still a white man's country, you know!"

"Yes," said the robot, "We have special ships."

"I want special quarters for me and my boys too," Spaulding went on. "We got word from regional headquarters of the P.V. that General Ardmore wants us to keep together." He grinned a snagily toothed grin, "Just so we can be sure everything goes the way we want it out there."

"Why, yes . . . your General Ardmore has made it quite plain and as a result, special ships will be provided. There are others in various parts of the world who want them. We believe in self-determination and everyone in the Confederacy gets what he wants. I will make arrangements for another tender to be sent to pick up all who wish special arrangements."

"Hello. Hello, ladies and gentlemen!" boomed the television, "This is your Eee Zee Freezer newscaster bringing you another broadcast in our full coverage of the end of the world. First, however, a few important facts from our sponsor."

*In Times Like These You Have All Seen What Heat Can Do. Food Spoils In Hot Weather, Doesn't It? Well, Unfortunately There Isn't Any Electric Power Right Now or Your EEE ZEE Freezer Would Keep Things Just Right For You. But What About When You Get Out There, on That New Planet? Are You Gonner Be Caught Short? Not If You Buy Yours Now! Don't Wait Until You Reach Your New Homes. It May Take a Little While For Old EEE ZEE to Get Back Into Production. Avoid Increased Costs And Possible Delays by Buying Now. Remember We Can Still Make Immediate Delivery Up to Three Days Before The End."*

A lovely blonde demonstrated the Eee Zee Freezer with incredible detachment.

"Now, for our news broadcast. We take you to Washington where General Ardmore is scheduled to embark in a ship especially prepared for him by the Galactic Confederacy."

On the screen, we saw General Ardmore standing at the top of the gangway

watching as thousands of splendidly equipped troops of his "personal" regiments were loaded aboard.

"We go to a great new destiny of the human race, one in which there is no limit to the possibilities of achieving a place in the sun."

A few minutes later we watched the general's tender go alongside a spaceship with VIP painted on its side.

"VIP? What does that stand for?" demanded Mrs. Melville-Tomkins.

"Very Important Person," Spaulding told her, "It's from the last war."

"Are you sure it means the same thing to aliens?" I remember asking.

"Sure! That tin man said they were just like us, didn't he? VIP, Very Important Person! Hey, O4, are we going to get one of those VIP ships?"

THAT evening was as hot as the day had been. Fires lit up the sky in almost every direction as abandoned buildings and fields burned—but the TV droned on. Kewitt and I watched the screen and saw rank after rank of German grayshirts with arms lifted march aboard tenders with rifles slung. We saw big Russian hundred-ton tanks lumber aboard. Mankind was indeed taking with him his most treasured possessions. Taking them into a Confederacy which had known nothing but peace hitherto. We watched them all loaded aboard big, elaborate, decorated VIP ships.

"Extensive preparations are being made by the Churches of America to send missionaries among the people of the Confederacy in order that they might have the benefits of more enlightened . . ."

The tender arrived for our VIP'S and Spaulding and his boys paraded aboard, their jaunty overseas caps at just the right angle and with their drum and bugle corps bringing up the rear. I stood with Mayor Briggs and watched as Mrs. Melville-Tomkins and her family took leave of their servants.

"Aren't you going on this ship, Mayor?" I asked.

"Not me! This is for the really im-

portant people in town," he said as he watched the captain of the local Loyalty Police and his men follow the P.V.'s on board.

Ben Spaulding stopped for a moment at the top of the gangway, looking like he was trying to assume a General Ardmore pose. His pale blue eyes glanced over the crowd of townspeople and hardened as they came to rest on the small group of people who stood on the outskirts of the crowd. He looked at them, staring hard at their faces which ranged several shades darker than the others.

"This was always a white man's country, and it's going to be a white man's Galaxy! Don't forget that!"

He turned and entered the ship, the hatch closed and the saucer lifted silently from the ground.

"Well, they're gone!" Mayor Briggs brushed a few cigar ashes from his round stomach, shuffled his feet once or twice, glanced at the city councilmen and then walked over to the people who stood to one side.

"Don't know why you folks shouldn't move over under the trees with the rest of us—awfully hot in this sun," he said and walked away.

So we waited and watched and when our turn came, we went aboard a ship and patiently waited again until the last ship filled up. We waited and saw Mercury and Venus swallowed up in a mass of flame . . . waited as the last tender made the last trip to attempt to bring away some of the few million stubborn

hold-outs who for various reasons had not arrived at the assembly points. We waited until for safety's sake the fleet dared remain no longer and then we began the great migration.

Now, of course, we have a new earth circling around a new sun. In some ways a better earth, where the springs are twelve months long and the struggle for existence that made us what we were isn't as intense, where there is food and work for all and where the virus of hate has almost disappeared. We still have no direct contact with the people of the Confederacy, but that will come in time. And, oh yes, the VIP ships. Well, there's one other thing I remember about that last spring. I remember standing beside the robot O4R9 in the control room of our ship and saying, "What does the VIP mean on those other ships? Do you really have segregation and special privileges in the Galactic Confederacy?"

The three small red lights that passed for O4's face blinked several times. The voice box in his stomach hummed, "My, didn't I say what VIP stood for? We thought it was obvious; VIP, Very Insane Persons. Look." He pointed to the viewer screen. I turned just in time to see groups of ships with the big white letters break away from the main fleet. They turned slowly, changing course and one by one plunged into the cataclysmic horror that had been Sol.

"The Confederacy believes in self-determination. They asked for 'a place in the sun,' didn't they?"



## QUANTUM RELATIVITY

**The sparrows and the swallows**

**Have reduced their forces.**

**The reason is as follows:**

**Fewer horses.**

**—A. Kulik**

# THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 6)

was even a land-route that was scientifically justifiable. It went through Siberia.

So a gang of telegraph construction men went to Siberia. They put in three years surveying the line, gathering poles and equipment and getting set.

They had the job licked when the submarine cable—which was scientifically absurd—not only was laid but began working and kept on working. So the Siberian line was called off, the work was wasted, and some hundreds of thousands of telephone-poles were allowed to rot. There are some swell adventure stories in the history of that enterprise, though it's long forgotten.

The scientific minds back of the Siberian enterprise forgot that it was more necessary to get the job done, quickly and neatly, than to stick to mere possibilities. Somebody ought to do some real research on what sheer necessity does as a cause of achievement. You know the old hunter's story, which reached the point where the hunter said, "And then this rabbit climbed a tree." And somebody said, "Hold on, rabbits can't climb trees!" The hunter said briefly, "This one had to," and went on with his tale.

You see, I think we science-fiction fans are serving as a sort of necessity for scientific accomplishments and their realization in tangible objects. When we fans get to work on a necessity, we get results. I would like to point out, very modestly, one of our achievements. This is something the scientists did not do, and we did, and I think it is significant. It will seem more important still a few years from now.

I think that we science-fiction fans—including all the people who by nature and instinct belong with us—have made space-travel a likely achievement some centuries ahead of its logical time. On the face of it, the thing looks rather far from common sense. But nobody now doubts that we are going to have space-travel. Not any longer. Afar off, but audible as an elfin horn, our raspberries at the scoffers have made space-travel a confidently awaited accomplishment.

We have made it something that has to be done!

In cold, sober, statistical fact the distance to the moon is 236,000 miles. The highest officially recorded flight,—and by an unmanned two-stage rocket, at that—has been 250 miles. We've managed to send something one-one-thousandth of the way. Proportionately, you might say that we are as close to a landing on the moon as a Spanish fisherman, casting a net off Burgos in 1491, was to setting foot on the New World. Actually, he was relatively nearer. We still have 99.9 per cent of the way to go. He had no more than 99.6, of the way beyond him.

Nevertheless it is rare today to find anybody who asks "Can it be done?" People ask, "How can it be done?" It is no longer questionable that it must be. And people like us have caused that change. We've changed a journey to the moon from a fantastic speculation to a fascinating problem. And fascinating problems always get solved, unless inherently impossible.

(Parenthetically, inherent impossibilities are those which involve contradictions in basic ideas. For example, it is impossible to add two and two and get five, because the idea of five is contradictory to the idea of the sum of two two's. It just won't divide that way. It's impossible to eat one's cake and have it too, because the idea of eating it involves the idea of digesting it, which contradicts the idea of having it. And—here I moralize—it is impossible for us to consider that we are higher animals and nothing else, and while believing it to make a civilization fit for anything but beasts.)

As science-fiction fans I think we are a little bit more acquainted with what is inherently possible than non-fans are likely to be. There may be crackpots among us, but crackpots are everywhere and in all ages. There have not always been science-fiction fans, however, and it is an appalling thought. Because we are the people who insist that our civilization is not finished, either in the sense of completed or in the sense of *kaput*. When or if—please God!—

the human race dispenses with warfare as a technological stimulant, on us and people like us will rest the responsibility of keeping the world headed somewhere that is not to the dogs.

After all, our civilization is scientific, but it isn't the scientists who made it that way. It was quasi-crackpots like us who insisted that they didn't know how this or that or the other thing could be done, but stood up on their hind legs and howled that they wanted it. So things like zippers, and antibiotics, and airplanes, and seventh-inning stretches, and hot dogs, and lawn-sprinklers, and iconoscopes, and vaccinations against whooping-cough came to be. People like us are responsible. Not in masses, necessarily. Frequently as stubborn individuals, or irritated individuals who had to find out from the scientists how to make what they wanted with their own hands, since the scientists wouldn't or didn't. I suspect I am saying that all the really constructive thinkers in the world either are science-fiction fans, will be science-fiction fans, or would have been if there'd been science fiction in their time.

I really think it's true that we have a job to do, a function to perform in the scheme of things, and that it's a pretty satisfying one. We are the people who hear a scratchy tin-foil record and want it better, and presently it is, and then we want something better, and we get radios, and we want something better, and we get television. (That was a slip-up!) Thus we are the people who are responsible for science being put to practical use. We want what we ain't got, and we insist—truthfully—that it is not inherently impossible, and ultimately we get it. We express our wants in science fiction, to be sure, but we express them otherwise, too.

Some of us do not read science fiction or write it or even engage in frenzied arguments about it. But most of us will, because we are the sort of humans who, being absorbed in science become at last science-fictioneers.

In one way or another, people who spur invention have brought us up from the caves and will eventually send our children to the stars. But we should take thought and

assert ourselves. We have a noble purpose which is excellently served right now by griping. So let us, all together, glare about us and snarl indignantly, "Where the hell are those space-ships we ordered last week?"

It's one way to get them. Make them necessary. Let's!

—Murray Leinster.

We pause for a time-honored cliché; Mr. Leinster's opinions remain Mr. Leinster's opinions, regardless of whether we agree with him or not.

## *ETHERGRAMS*

STARTLING'S change in schedule has played hob with the letter column. There have been two and three letters from some of our prolific voices, and this is a situation which keeps us on our toes, as Gregg Calkins will attest. Any oversights are intentional, as it would take a stack of STARTLINGS reaching from here to Pluto and 7/16ths of the way back, to print all the letters now staring us in the face.

### HAPPY BIRTHDAY

by Emme Bouchonnet

Dear Mr. Mines: Where has I been for the past twenty eight years? Why haven't I seen this STARTLING STORIES before? All I really had to do was walk behind our local magazine stand and there, lo and behold, was another just filled with interesting mags. The two bottom racks were for the younger set, comic books galore! But among the top three my attention was caught. And by what? Your May cover! By the way, what in the world was that contraption he was trying to put on that poor girl anyway? And with her looks, why?

So, I bought the book quickly after I picked it up before I could change my mind. Then I sat up half the night reading it. Even the letters to you, dear Mr. Mines. My husband scoffs. The nicest thing you can say about it is it's an escape, he says. But then my life hasn't been particularly unhappy. From what do I have to escape?

As to the stories. Don't you think THE THREE was a little bit morbid? I can understand why you included it though. It lends a kind of balance for the rest of the magazine.

THE CONDITIONED CAPTAIN I liked. If this is what your readers call space opera (I haven't read enough like it to know) then I still like it! I'll comment on WE BREATHE FOR YOU next, because being a housewife I can see a lot of sense in some of those services. But I do agree with Mr. Loomis about the ending. It is nice to raise your own babies. THE IMMOVABLE OBJECT made me see this old world of ours in an entirely different light. One I would like to discuss at length, but will refrain out of respect for the limit of your patience. I decline to discuss MATING TIME at all. A psychological block of my own, perhaps.

In closing, may I say I enjoyed reading the whole thing! And what an impetus to my imagination. How about a story on the search for a gas that will anesthetize a person to all but their immediate aim, and yet not bring on dreams that will drive them mad? Or the beautiful rebel from the outer planet who shows the king of space that his subjects aren't as happy as he had thought they were? Amateurish? What did you expect?—4234 Badgeley Ave. Cincinnati, Ohio.

The contraption was a space suit—and she needed it. You wouldn't want her wandering around in that costume she was wearing and catch cold, would you? Sorry you just came in, you missed the argument which led up to that cover. A large and vociferous contingent of female readers have been complaining that we were getting into a rut—nothing but girls on the cover. They wanted more men. So we compromised with one of each. Anyway, welcome aboard.

## THAT MYOPIC LOOK

by Mr. H. D. Boyles

Sam! I demand an apology, you back stabber. Mrs. indeed! It's MR. H. D. Boyles. And I am not even married even. I'll bet you have dozens of such sneaky ways of getting even with fans who fail to sooth you with a kind word. I don't advise opening your mail for a few weeks, Sam. I am quite upset. I may go completely out of my head. On second thought, I would not mail you a bomb. Bombs are so traceable. It will probably be a box of candy with one piece full of something elusive. Something like—say germanium oxide.

You did seem to appreciate that snob pun—or did you! I suppose at times it is difficult to tell the "tongue in cheek" letters from the serious one. For instance, how much of this letter is serious? Would I really send you a bottle of whisky full of Hydrogen selenide?—215 N. Auburndale, Memphis, Tenn.

This, no doubt, is in the nature of a small catastrophe to you, but we are not as embarrassed as we might be because of your terrible handwriting, which gives us an alibi. Small sand crabs, dipped in ink and permitted to scurry hither and yon over the paper, would create Palmer penmanship compared to what you fondly believe is handwriting. Hah. Otherwise, thank you for the gifts, none of which we will open.

Oh, yes, we enjoyed the snob pun.

## LOGIC, YET

by Frederick B. Christoff

Dear Sam: Occasionally an editor makes certain statements. Then several months later he contradicts himself. I refer to your statement of several months ago when you said, not in these exact words, but similar, that you put all the fan mail in your desk drawer. Then before making up the letter column, you took a few hours to read them. Then you picked out the best ones to print.

Now this month in answer to a certain letter you state that you receive around ten thousand letters which can be considered fan mail because they say they like your publication.

I was curious to know how you can put ten thousand letters into a desk drawer, also how you can read that many letters in three or four hours.

Not wishing to say you are making wild statements, or that you can't resist the impulse to tell little fibs, I gave the matter thought and came to the following conclusions:

1. Your drawers must be very large. Perhaps they are red flannel too.

2. All the fan mail must be on micro-film, which isn't very likely.

3. Your drawers are three, four, or five dimensional and have an opening into another world.

Now I am not interested in your drawers. I want nothing to do with them. I wouldn't even take them as a present. Therefore, leave us hear no more about said drawers.

However, a few conclusions about your reading all the letters:

1. You pick out the envelopes with the prettiest stamps and print the contents. The rest you sell to a paper dealer, thus making a little profit on the famish efforts.

2. You have a photogenic (huh?—Ed.) mind, so just need to glance at the letters. But on this point I must state that there is some doubt as to whether you really have a mind or not.

3. You are being paid to print certain letters which have identifying marks on them. Thus making them easy to sort out of the rest. The other letters you burn to keep your office warm.

4. You write the letters yourself, but this is highly improbable, because you just ain't that smart.

Now about this month's SS. EARTH IS THE EVENING STAR was best, although most people will say the novel was better for the one and only reason that it was the lead novel. The Merwin and Philips' efforts we could have done without. Not that they were bad, but they could have been better. The article was enjoyable, something I don't often say or think. The letter column was as good as usual. Sorry to hear you have finally given in to the aliens' demand for men on the cover. When that issue comes out I won't look at it. Which reminds me, this month's cover was lousy.—39 Cameron St., Kitchener, Ont., Canada.

Actually, we use a time-honored method for selecting the letters to print. We save them all up in the sixth-dimensional drawer (only four inches deep, yet holds ten to thirteen thousand letters) until department time. Then we take them out and toss them all up to the ceiling. The ones that stick are the ones we use. So that explains what happened to the other four letters you wrote this month.

## REASONS, SCHMEASONS

by Louise H. Pease

Dear Mr. Mines—I've been reading SS and TWS, off and on, for two or three years, but I'm not much of a "writer-to-the-editor" mostly because of an unfortunate tendency toward procrastination. However, this latest installment of remarks on the subject of "hen-clubs" versus "fen-clubs" managed to stir me out of my lethargy.

Why, oh, why, do most men continue to believe that women do nothing but talk, think, scheme, dream of the so-called "stronger sex?" Maybe I'm neurotic or something but I can find plenty of other topics of interest. Never having met any s-f fans, aside from my step-brothers, I can't judge if they differ from the rest of the species—but the latter's apparently congenital sense of superiority to anything any little "feather-brained female" may say is rather tiresome after a while. It's a relief to be among women, where you don't have to pretend to be a sweet ignoramus, or else have your ideas treated as childish babblings (not because of their merit, or lack, but because of your sex). I don't say every man has this glass curtain in his mind, but the majority certainly seem to. Men are necessary to women for only three or four reasons, as far as I can see, and some of those are obsolescent:

1. Economic—only if you're a parasite, or have small children.

2. Paternal—Unfortunately, parthenogenesis in humans isn't practical yet.

3. Labor—machines are more efficient and easily managed.

4. Defense?—So why should they be so egotistical?

Sorry for running on so—just letting off steam, I guess. That's one reason I enjoy your mags. so much; people say almost anything they like apparently. The stories are usually pretty good, too, lately, but I agree with Mr. McCain about THE LOVERS—it wasn't as good a story as the buildup led one to believe, aside from the biological novelty.

I have a few dozen mags., if anyone would care to swap. And just out of curiosity, does anyone in Vermont read s-f? The newsstands are loaded with the stuff, but I've never seen anyone buy a copy, and know of only one woman, 40 miles away, who reads it.—R.D.I., Colchester, Vt.

P.S.—I may sound like a frustrated spinster, but I'm happily, if argumentatively, married.

What invariably disappoints us about all these arguments as to why women need men and vice versa is that the most important one is always left out. Women are continually bringing in the economic reason or the parental reason—women need men for children but just wait'll parthenogenesis, then we'll show you! It's enough to make a man completely distrustful of all women when he is so plainly told he is merely being used.

As a matter of fact you're missing the point altogether. Maybe primitive people huddled together for protection, for economic reasons, for children. But that's no reason we have to remain primitive, is it? Our minds, our senses, our tastes are vastly more developed. We have a much keener appreciation of the value of a human being, of the need for affection and emotional security in everyone's life. The primary purpose of a union between man and woman need not be for economic reasons or for having children at all, it may be for a companionship which is more complete than friendship. Other things may come along but children are not the basic motive for marriage because children spend only a short time with the parents and then move out to lives of their own—and should. And parents who build their lives around their children are criminally foolish—they are

left with nothing when the children go.

They are even criminally negligent, neglecting in themselves the special contribution each might make to the world. What kind of immature society is it in which each generation sacrifices itself for the succeeding generation of immature minds? How can anyone grow up to maturity?

Married people who build their lives around their affection for each other and outside interests or work, are ensuring their own normal growth and development as human beings, not as mere reproducing machines. We have seen too many tragic mothers who clung to their children long after they should have turned them loose, who lived empty and meaningless lives between visits of the children—which visits occasioned less and less joy all the time and became more and more duty as Mother became more and more martyred.

And there we go, losing our referee's cap again.

## LITTLE MAN, WHAT NOW?

by Roy Seiler

Dear Sam: You bounder, you, wouldn't print my first letter because it was hand-written, eh? Well, I dare you not to print this one. What have you got a secretary for but to read letters like that from typewriterless fen like me.

Did you know ol'Lolly Popp put a celebrity on your May cover? That handsome hunk of beefcake resembles Robert Mitchum; yessir, an expectorator image of Hollywood's Tip-Top-Tea Hound. All in all (including the babe) a real ZORCH cover, altho it had nothing to do with the story, but what cover does?

Tsk, tsk . . . incest yet Sam!! I'm referring to Pester and Fester's THING, of cerse. I was once a member of the Little Men. Had to quit tho; I mentioned that hideous, & unmentionable word, Science Fiction at one of the meetings. It was THEN that they kicked me out. I was mad, I didn't get to finish my beer. That was the start of my downfall. I'm now a member of the Cosmetic Sexagon, which is about as low as you can get.

Despite the slight sex angle, SS is still one of my favorite mags. In fact so much so that I'd rather take it to bed with me instead of going out to night clubs since it has no cover charge.

I should now like to thank my friend Lyle Kessler of Philly for nominating me for president of the Variants. I heartily accept this nomination and have but this to say to you

members, "A vote for Seiler is money in your pocket!"

Your discourse on the Lorentz-Fitzgerald Contraction was entertaining enough, the aSF did it up fine (along with a letter of about four pages of math) back in 1950; L. Ron wrote a yarn about it to start the whole Thing off, which was before the Engrams got him.

As a concluding statement I'd like to say that this letter couldn't have been written without that scintillating spirit of Fandom, GHOULADE (kept where all fen spirits are kept, a bottle). For the secret formulae, send 25 soft drink bottle caps to GHOULADE, in care of my address.—Roy Seiler.

As you may have guessed, the only reason we printed this alleged letter (written in green ink, which Seiler swears is his blood) is in the hope that someone will translate it for us. We couldn't make heads nor tails of it. Seiler's heads, of course.

## A NEW LOW

by Rev. C. M. Moorhead

Sir: Ken Crossen usually has been able to skirt thinly the edges of the religious morass, but this time he jumped right into the middle of it with both of his big, clumsy feet! As far as I am concerned, his story, HALOS, INC., in the April issue of STARTLING STORIES, stunk!

I consign it to the same building that I relegated Damon Knight's TURNCOAT to, and you can drop Mr. Crossen through the hole along with the other refuse, Bah!

Both S.S. and T.W.S. have sunk to a new low when they have to depend on stories of this calibre for sales!—Community Church, Kelleys Island, Ohio.

The implied similarity between HALOS and TURNCOAT doesn't seem entirely clear to us. HALOS satirized people who will turn a worthwhile movement into a get-rich-quick scheme. TURNCOAT took a dig at advertising and big business—or rather the excesses of each, we should say. This kind of criticism is entirely valid because if you choke it off, and if you eliminate a sense of humor, you open the way to just the kind (if not the degree) of excess which the stories exaggerate for effect. In that sense every farce is an exaggeration to the logical end. We recommend a certain amount of laughter, even if it be at ourselves.

## NO DODDERING SHE

by (Mrs.) Doris E. Jones

Dear Mr. Mines: I do not number letter-writing among my accomplishments, and, in fact, as far as editors go, this is my first. After reading Miss Behrman's letter in the May issue, I felt that since she had so aptly expressed my very own sentiments, the least I could do to show my gratitude was to leap to the defense of the brave young lady who dared to tell the ghastly truth and to tell her "I'm with you." As I am a doddering old lady of twenty-one, my maternal instincts were aroused by her dauntless courage in writing what I have long yearned to say.

If you have gotten this far, may I go on to say that SF is one of my favorite—if not THE favorite—type of reading material. SF is, at last, beginning to come into its own. But—and that is a very important "but"—I fear that its fame shall be short-lived unless there are some drastic changes made. Any respect and dignity which SF may possess—and I am certain that it has much of both—is lost. As long as the covers of your magazines are covered with buxom femininity, more nude than not, and as long as you continue to litter the back pages with the adolescent nonsense of moronic juveniles (and I include in that field those from 9 years to 90), I fear that the "aristocracy" of the land shall continue to look down its long blue nose in scorn. Instead of defiling your covers with some myopic artist's misconception of a robot, or the insides of a spaceship, or again his misinterpretation of an author's description of a monster from another world, why not bless your covers with a lunar landscape or some other plausible painting and leave the conception of robots, spaceships and monsters to the imagination of the reader. Paintings of such a nature would lend beauty and, sans nudes, decency to your magazines. Let me say that I am sure that even the youngest of us know approximately what the feminine torso looks like.

I hope, in closing this letter, that I am not leaving you or my same fellow readers, with the impression that I am an inhibited old maid. I am not (an old maid). It merely grieves me to know that SF could be on the top rung of the ladder, but because of a few mistakes, is doomed to remain somewhat inferior to other fiction.—649 Chester St., Norfolk 3, Va.

Ideally, no one could quarrel with your preference for lunar and other worldly landscapes in preference to buxom near-nudes. But it has to be demonstrated yet to a hard-headed circulation department that sterile landscape covers sell magazines. Despite the familiarity you claim for the female torso, there seems to remain a not-

inconsiderable interest in it. And you may also add that people are more interested in people than in anything else. A very small group would be loyal to the landscapes, but a magazine cannot exist on a very small circulation; it must have a mass sale to meet its costs. Elementary, painful, but inescapable.

## THE BLUE PENCIL

by (Mrs.) Bertha Sundet

Dear Sam: I have been disgusted many times before, I have griped and I have even ranted and raved on occasion to, but—all of this is nothing, compared to what I am beginning to feel, more and more, every time I read TEV lately.

There are a few, but such a very few, who seem to feel that discussion of anything interesting to many, is perfectly alright as a subject to be discussed in TEV and TRS. One says, let's have sex in stories, or not have sex in stories, but let's leave discussion thereof out of the letter columns. What's the matter, are we so much different from the authors that we are not allowed to express our point of view, if not in stories, then in the letter columns? Another says (several others in fact) no religious discussions, either; they have nothing to do with SF. Yet many a story is built around some religious idea. But there again, simply because we do not always agree, we are not supposed to discuss it. Authors don't agree either, you know. Some use the argument nothing is ever solved by it, is that the only reason people discuss things? Shouldn't they ever exchange ideas unless something can be solved. What a dull world this would be if our thoughts were the carbon copy of everyone else's. Sex and Religion are both a part of life, and anything to do with life is always interesting to many. Politics, world conditions and customs of other people of other nations, are not specifically apropos to SF, yet we hear no one saying "let's not discuss these things." (At least we don't hear it yet, tho I am fully expecting it anytime now). They are all part of life, and of course we mustn't discuss anything that has anything to do with life, or death.

What then shall we discuss?—machines, plants, chemistry, compounds, and the atom. Oh, yes I forgot, we should leave the science out of SF, too. I agree with Mr. Crossen, that one need not have a detailed and professional knowledge of science to write a good science-fiction story; but for those who do have a good fundamental and basic conception of the particular science they are using in their story, and seeing there are many fans who have a smattering of the same and like it. I see no reason to leave science out of SF altogether.

Sam, now Sam, please, don't let them do this

to us, yes and you too; or soon you will find yourself editing National Geographic. From the look of things we will never need a government censor for the letter columns, anyway, a few of these so called, fans and one Author and Guest Editor will take care of that for all the rest of us. So kiddies, when and if, there gets to be nothing left for us to discuss, hash over, rant and rave about, let us just fold up our tents and quietly steal away.

So long but not good-bye (I hope, I hope, I—)*—Lake Preston, S. Dak.*

P. S. Three cheers, and hooray, for Barbara Behrman. Now, there is one teen-ager, I would like to know. Barbara honey, I am almost old enough to be your mother, but it is refreshing to find so much good sense in one so young, in years, but so mature in intelligence.

Well, so far very few punches have been pulled in these letter columns. We exercise only one form of censorship ourselves—we reserve the right to delete anything in bad taste. That covers a lot of ground, but then it has already been pointed out that ye ed has an unfair advantage always—the last word.

## JUSTICE FOR ALL

by Sid Sullivan

Mines precious 'lil ole honey you: At last the ladies are permitted a pinup of their own. Mmmmm. Quite a he-man that was on the cover. Have you ever noticed how illustrators usually pair a gee-orgeous doll with some homely, cow-licked, freckled-faced character? What is that guy thinking of anyway? The expression on his face looks familiar. Interested and interesting. Haven't had such a kick from anything in STF since the last time you printed one of my letters.

Several readers want SS to go digest size. Don't do it! You gave in to the howls for trimmed edges on 'which I'm neutral since it doesn't affect the quality of the mag. You cave in to the howls for cover men for which I'm grateful. But don't give in to these nitwits! Some customers can be wrong.

The digest size mags have approximately the same number of pages and the same size type as SS, which drastically cuts the wordage therefore leaving them a choice between printing serialized novels or novelets and short stories only. For the same reason their letter columns are mere skeletons, with no room for the amusing and slightly half-cocked trivialities one finds in TEV. Most disgusting of all, the digest-sized mags seem to feel compelled to produce high-minded litrachoor, which after repetition becomes boring. I have yet

to buy any of them with the regularity I accord to SS and TWS.

So Wm. Deeck is a good clean healthy American boy and likes women undressed. Isn't that statement rather sweeping? Modesty, mon enfant, as opposed to false modesty, is a useful thing. Go to any beach and notice the scores of women who would be vastly improved by a few yards of cloth. Besides, what should the gals do in cold weather? Freeze because you prefer bare skin?

Print that, Sam, if under your own by-line. The little squirt begged for it.

Other than "Bettyanne" I have never read a better projection of the psychology of an alien life than that in THE THREE. Mr. Dickson's interpretation of the Klantheid was exquisite. Seems like all I've been writing lately is raves, for a good reason. The mediocre stories will creep in; the moderately good ones are expected, but you, Sam, have been consistently printing excellent ones, almost one to each issue, in the past year. So I rave. I gotta, it's only just.—*G.P.O., Jacksonville, Fla.*

Too bad an earlier letter commenting on Tom Pace's discussion of the white-Negro problem in the south had to be sacrificed, but to answer your question about where I met southerners who agreed with Tom—some of them were in Bradenton, Florida, and some were in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and some were in Knoxville, Tennessee, and some were in Nashville—not far from your home town.

## J'ACCUSE

by Carol McKinney

Dear Sam: Cartoons in SS yet??? Haw! More?? Yes??

The May ish was rather disappointing. (Sombre background music, preferably organ.) THE CONDITIONED CAPTAIN not only was not good, it left a definite olfactory impression hard to eradicate, even by that most outstanding short, THE THREE. Now, if there were many more like *that* one, even if you had to ration them out, nobody (attention: Doug Graves) would say that SS is sliding back into the JAM group. (Just Another Mag).

So we are getting a sequel to THE LOVERS? Fine. Now all you have to do is get Vance to write one to the *best* novel you ever had the foresight to offer: BIG PLANET!!! Well, Sam? Seriously, now,—what are the chances for that ever happening?

WILLIAM DEECK: My dear, good, clean, healthy American Boy: My heart bleeds for you, actually. You say you don't like religion, and then you ask God to help you. You ask

## STARTLING STORIES

why ye ed prints adolescent drivel, and then you write worse—the conclusions of an immature mind. You don't like Capt. Future, Snarly or Crossen. You don't like our second rate mag. In fact, the only thing in that whole neurotic epistle you say you like is undressed women. That's unusual???

Sam, dear—we understand why you printed Deeck the Geeck's letter. You like your faithful supporters to be happy. You knew how much we would enjoy the laughs in the uncoy sentences. YOU DID!! Admit it!

I have only one more thing to say to DEECK: If you don't like our driveling letters, Crossen's masterpieces, our second rate mag, etc., etc., etc., I suggest you clutch your quarter in your hot little hand next time you are tempted to buy SS and spend it instead on a girlie gazette where you may gaze to your heart's content on all the undressed women you desire. And now I retire from the field of battle to avoid the rest of the thundering herd in their eagerness to reach the throat of our unsuspecting (?) comedian.

Incidentally, Barbara Behrman writes in much the same vitriolic tone that our (unnomenclable) foregoing character spouts forth. I suggest they hereby get together (preferably through TEV—so we can *all* enjoy the fireworks) as they consign fandom and its various enjoyable facets and fanzines to the outer reaches. Have they ever faced themselves in a mirror and asked, "You inconsistent imbecile—IF YOU DISLIKE SS SO MUCH WHY DO YOU BOTHER TO READ IT?" If you can't say something nice once in awhile, *shut your trap and keep it shut!* Nobody wants to read all your personal gripes.

And, Sam—I am accusing you of throwing in the more juicy gripes so you, quote, can sit back and enjoy, unquote, the rocks thrown in the other direction from your well-padded desk!!

Keep that ether vibrating! The frequency's really gone up lately! More fun—more fun slaughtered.—385 No. 8th East St., Provo, Utah.

Deeck, are you still there? We warned you, didn't we?

### A MERE \$5.75

by Helen M. Pawlowski

Dear Sam, (may I be so familiar?): In the May issue you printed a letter from Carol McKinney that contained what I consider to be an excellent idea. She suggests that you utilize the back cover for something more than advertisements. I agree.

Being the sub-cretin type myself, I've always had trouble trying to decipher star maps. I would be very thankful if you would print elementary directions for finding various constellations and planets. Until a few months

ago I knew only the Big Dipper, Orion, Polaris, and the Moon. I asked for help in the children's reading room of the local library and was assisted to the discovery of Sirius, Canis Major, and Cassiopeia. I feel like saying "Hi fellers" when I look up in the sky now. I think I know Jupiter, Mars and Venus (owing to the proximity of the three this past winter) but I would like to know more.

I read with interest the tales of planets, constellations and solar systems that are parts of your stories, but I would be much happier if I knew just where these places are. If you can't help me, perhaps some kind reader with the knowledge I desire would assist?

One more suggestion. I like the covers, but I wish you would have them pertain to the stories or at least have a small explanation somewhere in the magazine. I have a small son who asks innumerable questions about these covers and it would save me the wear and tear of memorizing my improvisations to satisfy the daily details he requires answers to.

I once read a description (by H. Allen Smith, I think) which fits most of your letter writers. They "suffer from a constipation of ideas and a diarrhea of words." I can't see where your magazine could be anything but improved by their absence. There were 23 letters in the May issue and the knob-heads who buy only to see their drool in print swelled your coffers by a mere \$5.75.

I only read the letters when all other reading matter is exhausted, and that includes reading the ads upside-down and backward.

To give me all that I require you could bring your magazine out every week.

Just one more thought. I have felt the scorn of the gals in the drug-store when they hand over the magazines they put aside for me. Now I look them in the eye, for haven't the big slicks slowly broken into the science fiction field? Yours, with gratitude for many happy hours spent with your Magazine.—327 Center St., Neenah, Wisconsin.

The financial department's hair is still standing on end. Throw out the ad on the back cover for starmaps, games, or pictures? Egad, don't you know where a magazine's income comes from? The two bits you pay doesn't cover it—those ads are vital.

### WATER UNDER THE BRIDGES

by Hank Moskowitz

Mines Dear Sam, (I didn't start the darn thing!):—Don't look now, but Sir Hank

of Moskowitz is taking to horse to champion the cause of the Good and Honorable Kendall Foster Crossen. Upon reading that Worthy's guest editorial in the February ish, I saw nothing radically wrong. I agreed with him and the over-all situation, in fact.

Upon perusing this month (May)'s TEV, I was shocked to see so many folks out for Ken's scalp and beard. Without mentioning names, I will now defend.

Sure, let's throw the science out of stf. Let's not forget or ignore, mind you, that thing called science, though. And I'd wish someone would show me one written by Smith, Pratt, or Asimov that had science for science's sake. I mean after the time when they had the choice of having it in a story. If there's science in the Foundation Series, it's there as an integral part of the story. And that goes for the rest.

Who says Ken got a jolt when breaking into stf? Well, maybe he did—it was something new and unknown. I bet the scientists working on the A-bomb got a jolt, too. And I'll bet you got a jolt, too, when you touched a bare wire containing 100,000 volts. Let's not be silly.

Do we want name authors in stf? Why not? I've heard tell that they can write pretty well. A name author is that because he's made a rep for himself by the material he writes. Are we damn fools? Are we goons who're going to blackball 'em "because they didn't help stf grow up; they're just cashing in!"? I hope not!

A new idea? Why? Maybe yes; maybe no. Ken said what was on his mind. If it's been said before, so what? I remember more than one person say, "I shall return." Look out, boys, we've been tricked. The Bradbury Hoax. He don't write stf. Hell no! Fts, it is. Somebody tell Doubleday. We can all jump out the window together. Hey! don't nobody remember Brad's westerns set on Mars. Yea man!

To the writer of the letter on page 142, left column (I ain't mention' names, I told ya!): Ken and Ray ought to be rayed—they dare put their ideas in stories and expect us to buy them, let alone read em! Shoot 'em dead, I say! Dead!!

All in all, Mines good friend Sam, I would if the letters show good American thinking . . . or an Inquisition trialling Ken for Hersey. What think you?

(There's a guest ed, if you want it. No? Well, I'll be satisfied with TEV. But I do demand to be heard!)

A fast run-down on the May ish. Pratt's novel is much better than his last for our mag. Remember *The Wanderer's Return*? Liked Bigelow's short best. Wish Loomis had taken time for a novel-length. Richardson interesting. Illos good. Nice Finlay's . . . Schomburg's for Richardson's has a cute twist to it—shows stuff that was on two of his covers.

TEV enjoyable, if bloody.

The February Emsh was as good as Bonestell? How can you compare 'em? Ever see Mr. B do a doll like that one? If circulation keeps rising, we may get more pages with the same price. As it stands now, SS deserves the 35c more than some mags that ask it today.

Keep the type bigger! Make stories shorter because people haven't got the time to read long ones. Make your tec novels shorter—suspect people want to know if the butler done it or not; they want to know sooner. No characterization. Just kill him, and have the killer shot by Hammer. Have pb large-size, so the type'll be larger.

So Joan got married, eh? No wonder Bix left! Ellison'll be disappointed. Does she still work in 1400? How about her pic on the cover some time?—*Three Bridges, N. J.*

Bradbury's Martian stories are Westerns? Yipe, don't tell that to Doubleday. Reviewers have been calling GOLDEN APPLES OF THE SUN litrachoor. The Bradbury stories are commentaries—Mars is a mirror of earth with its stupidities and inequities exaggerated so that no one can mistake them.

## TRUAX OR CONSEQUENCES

by John Truax

Dear Mr. Mines: Here I'm all set to write you a nice complimentary letter and then—what happens? I get to the 11th letter in THE ETHER VIBRATES and I explode! You said you were going to sit back and see the rocks being thrown—well, here comes one of which I am sure there are going to be many. Barbara Behrman has probably got the enmity of every teen-ager who reads S-F. Some of the letters that teen-agers write and are published are just "drivel." But this is definitely the minority and not the majority. She has the nerve to say "Why would you print such a letter from a child that age?" If this is true she is calling herself a child too. Many of the teen-agers of today are more informed than the so-called mature adults whose letters you print in your column. Barbara then goes on to call her letter a silly one. This is the one point in the whole letter in which I am in agreement with her.

As if this isn't enough a letter by Wm. Deek who doesn't want adolescent letters published in the Letter Column. Adolescents pay their quarter just the same as everybody else and so they have a right to say what they want to read in *Startling Stories* or any other magazine.

My opinion on sex is that sex on the covers is O.K. just as long as it isn't on evry cover.

## STARTLING STORIES

Let's have more variety. Letters on Religion should be kept out of a Science-Fiction Magazine. I certainly don't buy STARTLING STORIES just to read a letter on Religion. We have churches for that.

The CONDITIONED CAPTAIN by Fletcher Pratt was a pretty good novel except for one little thing. The hero was too heroic. Space Opera is O.K. but let's not have the big brave virtuous hero, the all-too lovely heroine, and that nefarious character the villain. WE BREATHE FOR YOU was one of the best novelets I've read in a long time. I was really believing that such a corporation did exist. And this is the sign of a really good story.

Well, my hatchet is dripping the blood of my victims all over the floor so I'll have to close this short note.—1102 9th Street, Rapid City, S. Dak.

P. S. Why don't you print a picture of yourself and your staff inside the front cover of SS?

The screams of outraged fandom are still echoing in these hollowed halls (no typo, hollowed is what we meant). Behrman and Deeck, Irritants, Inc., your nerves rasped while you wait. Does your adrenals no end of good.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

by Patricia Ann Kovas

Dear Sam: I have often wondered why people write letters to the Editor. After writing some myself, I still don't know.

There's a certain type of letter written in all seriousness that gives me a good laugh. Someone doesn't like civilization and fills up 3 or 4 pages saying why. Yeah, typewritten and single-spaced . . . probably has a scotch and soda in one hand and a cigarette in the other, too. Well, that's all right—they're entitled to their opinions.

I just wonder why someone hasn't made a Thoreau-like retreat to another Walden. On the other hand, I can see why, too. Gas furnaces, electric lights, refrigerators, automobiles, etc. etc. are too comfortable to forsake just for the sake of some cynical philosophy. So until something better comes along, I'll stick with civilization. After all, what did Thoreau prove? Merely that it could be done.

I'm glad to see you're coming around to the revolutionary idea that women are human. Just don't lean over backwards and endow us with traits we don't have. Women take special handling. Take heed. Sam.—119 N. Sutphin Street, Middletown, Ohio.

It's that special handling that has always intrigued us.

## ON HIS WAY

by Tetsu Yano

Dear Mr. Mines: Your magazine causes wonderful effects. After my first letter was appeared in your STARTLING, I got many letters and magazines. After I had read a little amount of SF I made a small article "Views of The American SF." And it was published on Japanese newspapers.

Someone in your country made a good joke to suggest me to attend to the big convention of SF in your country. Newspaper man saw it and the letter was changed in the paper, newspapers reported "I will invite you to attend the world convention of the SF." After that Mr. Ackerman had guaranteed me, so I am going to your country to attend the convention. How lucky I am!

I will leave Yokohama on this 29th by Kamikawa-Maru ship. If you allow me to visit to your office or your house, would you please send the map—simple one—to the following address:

Tetsu Yano  
c/o Mr. Forrest J. Ackerman  
915 So. Sherbourne Drive  
Los Angeles, 35, Calif.

I do not know whether I can bring out the money or not, but if I can get the Herley's big twin after I reached to Los Angeles, I want to travel all over your country.

So, see you later in your country.—Taihei Bldg., Uozaki, Higashinadaku, Kobe, Japan.

A couple of people have questioned our friend's "fanny letters"—wondering if I made him up. Not I, quoth the walrus. He's real and on his way, apparently all due to some fast work by Mr. Ackerman.

## AFTER THE BRAWL

by Wm. Deeck

Dear Mr. Mines: Mr. Mines, I am sorry for you. You placed my letter in your magazine and answered it in your inimitable style. (Remember I asked you not to answer it.) Well it brought me back to argue with something you said. Please don't think I'm a fan. Even, and I quote, "the biggest brawl in the history of TEV!" could bring me to be a fan.

My remarks in my letter of the May issue were not meant to start any controversy or "brawl" as you put it. I was just expressing an opinion gathered from reading the letters. (The only reason they are called letters is that they have a Salutation.) My opinion on religion was that I didn't like it. No abstract thing like religion will get me to argue with anyone. So that puts an end to religion. That is, the arguing of it.

Sex. Just being 17 I finally found out

about it. I always thought the stork brought me. This gave me an inferiority complex. An ungainly bird bringing my genius into the world! Utter blasphemy. And then I found out about sex. Hooray! I'm the product of the two people I love the most. Of course, I'm sorry I can't be like these people who don't like sex. I mean the Androids you know. I would love to be manufactured as they are. Well they are.

Why is Hugo Gernsback called the father of SF? I've looked through his new magazine, *Science Fiction Plus*, and it seems to me that he ought to hop in his little time machine and go back to the good old days where his kind of SF was liked. He should also take all Captain Future fans with him. Captain Future fans! They are the type that says down with progress. Progress brings war. Therefore, let us not go ahead, let us go back. But the Captain Future stories will be very dull for them. It requires imagination to write and imagination brings about wars too.

I agree with Barbara Behrman. You don't have to fight the fans alone. Mr. Mines said you would but he forgot about me. I'm only five foot five and haven't any brains but I'm on the intellectual level with the rest of the fans. You can tell that from their letters and mine.

Mr. Mines, I have a favor to ask of you. In fact, two. You are a sweet, kind, lovable, and an intellectual giant. (Now that I've buttered you up, I shall ask the favors.) Will you please put in your magazine some stories by T. P. Caravan? That's the only thing Ray Palmer has over you. Mr. Palmer can recognize genius when he sees it. If you put some of T. P. Caravan's stories in your magazine I will tell all my friends that you are a genius. (I could say, like some of your infantile letter writers would "You didn't think I had any friends did you?" But I won't.) Do this for me and I might send in a subscription.

This is the second favor. See if you can buy the rest of "Master of the Universe" from Howard Browne. It didn't cost him anything as the author isn't around to collect any money seeing that he hasn't been born yet. Or so Mr. Browne wants people to think. I sure would like to know what happened to Byron and his fifty thousand followers when they tried to conquer Luna. Do this for me and I won't say anything against your magazine again. In fact, it might get in my first ten of the SF magazines.

If you don't print this letter, at least remember the two favors I asked. (You'd better print it. I sent it airmail Special Delivery so that you would have to notice it and that kind of money doesn't grow on trees. So the old proverb goes. In Science Fiction anything can happen. Or didn't you know?) Well if you still don't print it after all those threats, I have one more threat to make. "Beware the

Jabberwock, my son."

If you do print it though, I will continue to buy your magazine no matter how bad the stories are.—8400 Potomac Ave., College Park, Md.

P. S. Don't tell me machines can't think. I want to type one word and the machine types another. I strike one key and another hits the paper. The typewriter is trying to stop me when I write this letter. If that's not intelligence I don't know what it. Of course it is not too smart as a lot of the words are misspelled.

Naturally we refused to print your letter, since threatening us is the worst way to get anything out of us. Not only did we refuse to print it, but we were tempted to cut it drastically until we realized that this time your comments have left you wide open for some very effective ripostes from the fans. In fact we'd riposte ourselves if our French dictionary hadn't gotten lost. So we throw you to the wolves.

## A BAS LE SCIENCE

by Randall Garrett

Dear Sam: There has been much to-do about K. F. Crossen's guest editorial some months back, centered especially on his First Rule for Science Fiction: "Throw out the science."

I'm not going to argue either pro or con, but I'd like to toss in an opinion.

It seems to me that this ties in rather closely with the old arguments about the difference between "fantasy" and "science-fiction." I, personally, define the latter as a specialized branch of the former within a highly elastic framework.

So? What do I mean? Well, suppose an author has an idea for a wonderful story (i.e.: one that will sell) and, in order to make the story come out right, he needs a race of beings which look exactly like humans.

Okay, where do they come from? He knows that if he says Jupiter or Saturn, an outraged howl of protest will arise from the fans who are a bit skeptical about human-type beings breathing methane and ammonia at minus 200° F.

Mars or Venus? The howl won't be as great this time, although it should be. There are some fans who will permit Martians who look like humans, although the probability is only a little greater than that for Jovians.

So what does our author do? He invents the planet Vuzd, known on the astronomical charts as Altair IV. Vuzd, it seems, is just exactly like Earth in atmosphere, gravity, etc. These humanoids, due to parallel evolution, are just like Earthmen. Now the author can

## STARTLING STORIES

have them come to the Solar System in their ultralight ships and begin the invasion.

Howls from agonized fans? No. (Not unless the plot may be just a wee bit trite.)

Why no howls? "Parallel evolution" calls for a highly intricate series of coincidences over a period of about a billion years. The readers certainly wouldn't permit the hero to win over the villain by flipping an honest coin so that it fell heads one hundred times in succession.

And what about the ultralight drive? The average fan admits that it's impossible, shrugs, and goes on with the story.

What about telepathy, ESP, and psychokinesis? Equally fantastic. Dr. Rhine's experiments show that there may be something to it, but reputable scientists have also investigated ghost-haunted castles and come away without an explanation. A story about a ghost is not science-fiction, although a story about a "being made up of pure energy" is acceptable.

As a matter of fact, the list of fantastic things that the average reader will accept is about a foot and a half longer than your arm.

Then what can the author get away with? Answer: Damn near anything, in spite of the reader.

How? Jack Williamson answered that one. If the story has only one fantastic element, and the rest of the story is built up logically around it, the fans will okay the tale as science-fiction.

Williamson's own rhodomagnetic theory is a case in point. By surrounding the theory with enough scientific-sounding double-talk, he managed to turn out a highly entertaining novel.

Then what about the "bloopers" that the reader refuses to accept? THE CONDITIONED CAPTAIN by Fletcher Pratt contained two examples of the same sub. On page 35 of the May issue, Pratt says:

"We're not gravity," said Astroth, reaching out to touch a board which had suddenly become "dorm." "But not much. I think we're in an orbit around that fellow there." He stabbed a finger (toward a star on the view-plate).

On page 59, he says:

Astroth reached out to touch Paulsson's arm and point to where, not 300,000 miles away, a methane planet was swinging, its pull already throwing them into the webbing as the Argo responded to its gravitational attraction.

In both cases, the spaceship is in free fall in the vicinity of a massive body. But the people inside a spaceship in free fall wouldn't feel the pull of gravity, regardless of how close they were to the body or how massive it was. For shame, Fletcher.

So there you have it; some things are acceptable, some are not. The borderline is hard

to define, which makes it difficult for the detective story and western story writers to break into the field—they just don't know what they can get away with and still please the readers.—Peoria, Ill.

What you have discovered is that there are two (at least) kinds of science-fiction stories. One approaches the science part of it quite seriously and attempts to build a story along logical extensions of known theories. The other concerns itself not at all with the verities, but uses exaggerations of science for satirical effects. Thus Bradbury and thus Crossen. Both fun, no?

## THE VOICE WITHIN

by Robert Cobb

Dear Meany Mines: Yes, meany. Meany, meany, meany, meany. What else can I call you? You put out a skimpy five mags, with never more than 200 pages.

What are you trying to do, BORE ME?????? I'm going to go bankrupt anyway, so it might as well happen buying your mags. What I want, Sam, is a 700 page mag (at least), containing about *two* full length novels, (plus everything else of course.) No, no Sam don't think of raising the price. I've got a better idea. Ah, yes, Sam, the light dawns . . . I am about to make a revelation. You will put out a NEW MAG!!!

Just for you I went into a trance and thought up a name. It was perfect. There I was in my trance and suddenly the mag appeared! Splashed across the cover in big letters, was the title: *TITANIC TALES*. Then, in smaller letters was the subheading: *TREMENDOUS TREMORS OF TERRIFYING TOMORROWS*. (I can't help it Sam, that's what it said.) There now, admit it. You couldn't have thought of a better title if you tried. (Don't start thinking though, you might pass out. Just thinking about thinking must be a strain on you). If you don't agree with me though Sam, why don't you visit me and we'll talk it over. You can come anytime but make sure you take off your shoes. . . . After all you might rip the padding on the walls. (You do walk horizontally, don't you Sam?) (or maybe triangularly? whatever that is).—488 Appleton Street, Arlington 74, Mass.

Ah, the speculative mind! Is your strait-jacket comfortable? Padding not ripped on the walls? Come down off that ceiling!

## NEWSSTAND IN KOREA

by Cpl. Richard R. Smith  
USS2091438

Dear Sam: Remember me? Does anybody remember me? No? Well, anyway, the great

day has finally come: they are now selling TWS and SS in Korea. That should cheer your editorial heart. Congratulate the Distribution Department or something. Well, I bought a copy: the April ish of SS and I began remembering the grand ole' days when Sam Merwin and you were rejecting my stories like mad and I had a letter printed in almost every issue of TWS and SS. I remembered the old days of untrimmed edges and half-naked women on the covers when I was young and bold and called James Blish's writing "junk" and upset Arthur C. Clarke enough that he had a letter printed to back up a point in one of his stories that I disagreed with.

So help me, I felt like an old man looking back on the days of his youth that were gone forever. Tear drops fell and trickled down the trimmed edges of SS. (I'm overdoing it!) Then, I told myself: Buck up, solider, you're just tired from waiting in chow lines and climbing hills and listening to the distant Boom-boom. You're not licked, yet! You shall return! You shall again have dozens of stories rejected by Sam and writes crazy letters in which you say crazy things. You shall again argue with the other fans about everything and criticise stories and have one heck of a time!!

And so, after two years, I return. Imagine a blare of trumpets, the dull beat of drums. I AM BACK. Looke, looke at ME!! Egotistical ME, in the fine tradition of fandom, will now declare his opinions.

EARTH IS THE EVENING STAR: "I" liked the style of writing. I think this was a great story. I—(Who cares what I like?) HALOS, INC.: I don't like footnotes!! They distract a person from the main line of action and besides that, it's hard to read the fine print.

SAAAAAYYY! These trimmed edges are nice! I keep running my fingers over them . . . and remembering the 'ole days when you didn't have 'em.

I enjoyed Tom Pace's letter. I agree with him: race prejudice should die off sooner or later. Against the negroes. And then, like you said, well put up "No Martians Allowed" signs all over Mars. Anyway, it isn't something you can pin down. Race prejudice, I believe, is not a THING but a RESULT of some psychological action inside a person's mind. If you accept the theory that the conscious mind is the "action" element of the mind and the subconscious mind the "reaction" element . . . and apply the universal law "For every action, there is an equal reaction" . . . you can understand. A person "looks down" on a race or anything at all with his conscious mind and PRESTO there is an exactly opposite reaction in his subconscious mind and he gets that intangible feeling of superiority. People like a feeling of superiority. They learn it by conditioned re-

flexes. They learn that by whispering about the woman down the street or condemning a person because of his color of skin, they somehow feel superior. And it goes on and on.

I believe that the only way to stop race prejudice and man's many other mental defaults is to treat the human mind not like some great, awesome, intricate and intangible entity BUT like the electrical wiring of a crazy machine. Because, although we like to think of our minds as something above anything material, they're nothing but a lot of electrical impulses.

Now, I have worked out a theory that the "Action-equal reaction" theory applies to the conscious and subconscious mind. It should: it applies to everything else in the universe. And I've got formulas . . . and I'm very happy . . . (Whoaaa boy, you're starting to sound like a mad scientist!) You know, I've often wondered where we would be today if instead of spending all the time, money, brains, and energy on splitting an atom, we had spent it on understanding a couple of electrical impulses inside the grey matter that makes us tick.

Too bad I missed Dickinson's letter. But let us have more letters like it!! Let's everybody talk about SEX and WOMEN! Let's have stories with SEX in 'em. Gaaahhhh. It's been a long time but I remember SEX and I remember women. I remember they're real soft and got long hair. Maybe we should put handsome men on the covers like Mrs. Kovacs suggested. Don't know where I got the "we." I mean "you," Sam.

I'm sorry I write such crummy letters, Sammy. BUT, I shall make amends by saying I liked the April ish of SS. I like the trimmed edges. I liked every story. (?) I think TWS & SS are the best on the market. I'm not kidding, either. Syanata (So long).—Hq. Br. AG Section, Hq. 8th Army, APO 301, c/o P. M., San Francisco, Cal.

Welcome back, boy. Let's hope that you get out of Korea real soon and back here where you can see women instead of remembering them and where you can feel badly again about not giving them your seat in the subway.

Loads of letters left . . . Martin Gross, 1118 Boynton Ave., Bronx N. Y., wants us to compare Bradbury with Thomas Wolfe—both had the lust for life, but Wolfe gets the edge. Marion Mallinger of the Pittsburgh SF Association wonders what Al Capp would do on a science-fiction cover—men would have fifty-inch chests and women would be equally fantastic.

Roy Tackett, 2022 Orchard Ave., Ogden, Utah, thinks man is ready for the stars

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despite witch doctor elements still in our civilization. Ellen Kaplan 65-05 Central Ave., Glendale 27, N. Y., a loyal fem, is mad at Barbara Behrman. Maril Shrewsbury having lost a syllable off her first name, is joyful because she has seen her name in print. Paul Mittelbuscher, Sweet Springs, Mo., wants to know how we get any editing done with that Marilyn Monroe calendar on the desk.

Charlie Wells, editor of FIENDETTEA, 405 E. 62nd St., Savannah, Ga., wants to know how we get SKYHOOK. They send it to us, bub; think only fanzine editors get fanzines? Richard Geis, 2631 N. Mississippi, Portland 12, Ore., announces a new fanzine, to be called PSYCHOTIC. Nothing personal Dick? Dick Clarkson, says we are right—they are studying him at Harvard. He is the human bean type—lima bean. Since he is also corny, that makes it succotash.

Betsy Curtis, Fountain House, R.D. 2, Saegertown, Penna., says she must have a sequel to FULFILLMENT—since Jig rejects his own externalized conclusions she cannot picture him running forever through knee-deep dream molasses. Even Schizophrenia would be better. Billie Lee Hanford, 2812 A Avenue, National City, Cal., announces a return to active interest in fan doings after a lapse of a couple of years, would welcome letters. Hanford would seem to be her married name—it was Randolph before. Paul F. Fereday, Ph3, Box 1393, Navy 128, c/o FPO, San Francisco, Cal., writes to rave about THE LOVERS and to ask for correspondents—it's lonely out there. Charles Lewis, Box 891, Denver 1, Colo., agrees with Tom Pace, but points out that southern politics makes sense, to those who control them. He also maintains that politics is the master of religions, not vice versa.

Fred Christoff, 39 Cameron St. S., Kitchener, Ont. Canada, likes Merwin better as a writer than an editor. Paul Strassel, Box 146, Venice, Cal., offers a supply of back numbers for 15c each. Write first to make sure of availability. Stuart B. Whitehead, 23 Intwood Terrace, Nelson Rd., Fakenham, Norfolk, England, enjoys SS, will swap British mags for more SS. James Harman, Vicker, Va., wants to know if anyone can get him a copy of SS with van Vogt's SHADOW MEN in it. A. Capinsky, 53 Mowbray Ave., Benoni, TVL,

South Africa, sends us some newspaper pictures of flying saucers says SS is terrific, Dean Grennel, 402 Maple Ave., Fond du Lac, Wisc., must have run across a copy of WSA—liked FIND THE SCULPTOR. Chloie Harley, R.R. #3, Armstrong, B.C., Canada, wants back issues of SS and TWS from Feb. '49 to Sept. '51. Glenna Spitzer of Lake Hiawatha, N.J., welcomes letters from anyone who wants to write to a 13-year-old.

L. D. Chandler, Rock Hall, Md., says stop jumping on the kids who write to TEV, they show as much, or more sense than a lot of the adults. Ray Thompson, 410 South 4th St., Norfolk, Neb., apologizes for mis-reading us in our December editorial. We had said machines do not think and he got it reversed and was huffy about it. Accept the apology. Nancy Moore, 8383 Roland St., Cincinnati, Ohio, disagrees with Tom Pace about Detroit being a pest-hole—says it's no better or worse than any other city its size, and that a place like Miami is worse. Also wants to know why we don't learn to write poetry. Learn? I thought it was a gift.

Charles F. Richter, 1820 Kenneth Way, Pasadena, Cal., wants more stories by Vance on "Big Planet," but not sequels to that story, just the same locale. Peter Gerety, 1941 Walton Ave., Bronx, N.Y., wants to know of fan clubs in the vicinity, has some back numbers to sell and asks who is Seibel? Hah, don't ask us to give that Navy-wrecker free publicity. Henry Barnett, Box 246, Crystal City, Mo., objects to Mrs. Bradley's program of breeding the lower classes out of existence. Good letter—sorry it was a bit long. Jean Leighton Moore, Shinglehouse, Penna., also objects, calling herself the "lower class" financially, but taking no backseat to anyone on the points of birth and breeding. Mildred Moore wants correspondents for her cousin, who's been laid up. His name is William Moore Jr., 117 Reed St., Hightstown, N.J. She could use a few letters herself. Her address is 120 Mercer St., same town.

Jacquelin Lewis, R.F.D. #2, Montepelier, Vt., likes the girly covers, but admits they're considered less dignified, has some mags to trade, wants female correspondents, loves Phil Farmer and Joe Gibson. Ted Wagner, 2005 Jefferson St., Madison 5, Wisc., wants to know if there are any fen

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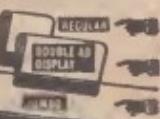
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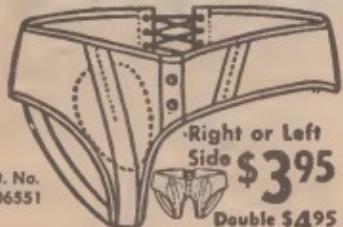
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in, near or around Madison. Joe Keogh, Glenridge Ave., St. Catharines, Ont., Canada, gets a grumble or two off his chest about Deek and Behrman. Bobby Gene Warner, P.O. Box 63, Bessmay, Texas, knows why fans get so silly—they'd be raving maniacs if they always suppressed it. Hillel Handloff, 37 So. Delancey Pl., Atlantic City, N.J., says we shouldn't be so sure you can't cut your throat with an electric razor. He knows a man whose necktie got caught in one and by the time his wife got there, all that was sticking out of the razor was one leg. Ghastly.

Earl Downey, Rt. 2, Gadsden, Ala., sends three bucks for a sub, with many endearing words. Smart kid. Tom Pace, 105 N. Thayer, Ann Arbor, Mich., says bless Marion Bradley and all other intelligent women who haven't let their intelligence freeze out their womanliness. (She's married, Tom.) Pistol Pete Purvis, 3401 Bryan Ave., Ft. Worth, Tex., is spurred to purple adjectives by Barbara Behrman. Ted Lenoire, All Alhachin, B1, Canada, (that's what his handwriting looks like) wants a copy of WONDER STORY ANNUAL. Louise Lopin (no address) likes CONDITION CAPTAIN, wants to know where her sample of OOPSLA is. Got her address, Gregg?

Doug Hinton, R.C.A.F. Station, Greenwood, Nova Scotia, Canada, badly wants a copy of SS with STARMEN OF LLYRDIS by Leigh Brackett in it. Audrey M. Putt, 1527 Penn St., Harrisburg, Penna., says TEV is the most interesting part of the mag. Huh, a born fan. J. Martin Graetz, 307 So. 52nd St., Omaha, Neb., says us Pogo fans always stick together. Everett L. Slosman, 12-B Atlantic Ave., Pleasantville, N.J., offers a pome: "Hear the jingle and the jangle. Here the change and quarters bounce, As the fans plunk down their money, For the Magazine that counts." It's the newsdealer who counts—the quarters.

David Fitzgerald, 800 W. 32nd St., Baltimore 11, Md., says our covers of late are hideous, wants more Schomburg. You'll get him. Jim Harmon, 427 E. 8th St., Mt. Carmel, Ill., is not in the army after all—the medics couldn't find any heartbeat. Lillian Sylvester (Mrs.) 245 Ill. Ave., Aurora, Ill., wants gals to write her... Hey, we're getting onto the back cover. Sorry if you got left out—better luck next time.

—THE EDITOR.

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